

A SIGHT TO DWELL UPON AND NEVER FORGET:  
ILLUMINATING STRATEGIES FOR SAVING PORTLAND'S NEON SIGNS



*Signal Station Pizza: Chad Randl; Fred Meyer: Security Signs; additional photos by the author*

by

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## ABSTRACT

Few elements of the twentieth century built environment have historically stirred as much optimism, ire, or nostalgia as neon signs. Despite a growing appreciation for its value by both municipalities and the general public, however, the fate of neon signage is far from secure. Significant barriers exist to its conservation and continued *in situ* existence, with beloved signs continuing to disappear and others languishing in states of disrepair. This project explores solutions to the question of how Portland, Oregon may better ensure that neon signs remain a vital part of its built environment. It argues that neon signs provide multiple civic benefits and advocates for a targeted blend of regulatory tools, economic incentives, and public advocacy and outreach aimed at fostering a socio-economic environment more supportive of their conservation and continued presence. This project first establishes a historic context that includes an overview of the history of neon signage and its relationship with public policy, followed by an outline of the many shining benefits these unique signs provide. By evaluating the relevant state and national tools available for protecting these valuable resources as well as focusing on the protections for Portland neon, it reveals potential for improvement. A curated survey of various strategies being employed around the country to protect neon signage identifies best practices, which are analyzed for their potential to be implemented effectively in Portland, culminating in a menu of recommendations for how city officials and neon advocates can best ensure a bright future for the city's neon signs. While research and recommendations are geared specifically to neon-rich Portland, the project's insights are general enough that their relevance extends to other cities as well.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
A. Methodology .....	4
B. Scope, Limitations, and Assumptions.....	5
C. Audience .....	10
D. Literature Context .....	10
I. Commercial Vernacular .....	11
II. Signage.....	13
III. Neon in Pop Culture.....	14
IV. Preservation.....	16
<b>CHAPTER 2 HISTORIC CONTEXT OF NEON SIGNAGE AND ITS REGULATION.....</b>	<b>19</b>
A. National Context .....	19
I. Development and Heyday (1890s-1940s).....	19
II. Image Changes and Regulation (1950s-1970s).....	23
a. A Time of Transition.....	24
b. Regulations.....	27
c. The Culpability of Historic Preservation .....	30
III. The Comeback? (1980s-today) .....	32
B. Portland Context .....	36
I. Portland's Neon History.....	36
II. Portland Neon Today .....	41
a. Geographic Distribution.....	41
b. The Sign Industry.....	45
c. Neon Sign Profiles .....	47

1. White Stag.....	47
2. Portland Outdoor Store .....	50
3. Laurelhurst Theater.....	51
4. The Whole 9 Yards .....	52
<b>CHAPTER 3 WHY NEON SIGNS MATTER.....</b>	<b>55</b>
A. Neon Signs Are Important Placemaking Elements.....	56
I. Neon Signs as City-Defining Features.....	57
II. Sign Parks .....	61
III. Activating the Night.....	64
B. Neon Signs Inspire Passion.....	65
I. Popularity.....	65
II. Economic Impact .....	67
III. Bringing Diverse Audiences into Preservation .....	68
C. Neon Signs Are Part of Our Cultural Heritage .....	69
D. But is it Art? (Yes).....	73
E. Neon Signs Are a Green Technology .....	76
<b>CHAPTER 4 THE CURRENT STATE OF NEON SIGN PROTECTION .....</b>	<b>79</b>
A. National Level.....	79
I. National Regulations.....	81
II. National Incentives .....	84
III. National Advocacy and Outreach .....	87
IV. National Neon Sign Preservation Issues and Recommendations.....	88
B. State Level .....	90
I. State Regulations.....	90
II. State Incentives .....	92
III. State Advocacy and Outreach .....	93
IV. State Neon Sign Preservation Issues and Recommendations.....	94



C. Local Level .....	94
I. Local Regulations .....	94
a. Historic Resource Protections .....	95
1. Local Historic Resource Protection Issues.....	99
b. City Code Language.....	100
1. Local City Code Language Issues.....	107
c. Design Guidelines .....	108
1. Local Design Guidelines Issues .....	115
d. Planning Documents .....	115
1. North Interstate Corridor Plan.....	118
2. Local Planning Documents Issues .....	122
II. Local Incentives .....	123
a. Local Incentives Issues .....	126
III. Local Advocacy and Outreach.....	126
a. Local Advocacy and Outreach Issues .....	129
<b>CHAPTER 5 NATIONAL NEON SIGN PRESERVATION BEST PRACTICES SURVEY AND ASSESSMENT .....</b>	<b>130</b>
A. Regulations .....	131
I. Special Districts .....	131
a. Albuquerque, NM .....	132
b. Miami Beach, FL .....	133
II. Vintage Sign Ordinances (Voluntary).....	134
a. Tucumcari, NM.....	134
b. Salt Lake City, UT .....	135
c. Nashville, TN.....	137
d. Miami, FL .....	138
III. Vintage Sign Ordinances (Survey-Based).....	140

a.	St. Petersburg, FL.....	140
b.	Burbank, CA .....	142
B.	Incentives .....	143
I.	Route 66 Corridor Cost-Share Grant Program.....	143
a.	New Mexico Route 66 Association.....	146
b.	New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance.....	147
c.	Route 66 Association of Missouri.....	148
C.	Advocacy and Outreach.....	149
I.	Inspiration-Oriented DIY Conservation.....	150
a.	Los Angeles, CA.....	150
b.	Pocatello, ID.....	154
II.	Awareness Building.....	155
a.	Denver, CO .....	156
b.	San Jose, CA .....	158
D.	Combination Approaches.....	160
I.	San Francisco, CA.....	160
II.	Tucson, AZ .....	167
III.	Tulsa, OK.....	176
IV.	Knoxville, TN .....	180
	<b>CHAPTER 6 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PORTLAND.....</b>	<b>183</b>
A.	Regulations .....	184
I.	Vintage Sign Ordinance .....	184
a.	Structure .....	185
b.	Bonuses .....	188
c.	Protections.....	190
II.	Code Changes .....	190
III.	Additional Regulatory Recommendations .....	195

B. Incentives .....	195
I. PIP Grant Improvements.....	196
II. Additional City Recommendations .....	197
III. Nonprofit Recommendations .....	199
C. Advocacy and Outreach .....	200
I. General Advocacy and Outreach Recommendations.....	201
a. Dedicated Neon Group.....	201
b. Existing Preservation Nonprofit.....	202
c. Dedicated Neon Group or Existing Preservation Nonprofit .....	203
II. Sign Park.....	204
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>GLOSSARY.....</b>	<b>211</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>212</b>
<b>ORIGINAL TABLES .....</b>	<b>228</b>
<b>FIGURES.....</b>	<b>233</b>
APPENDIX A – Preservation Stages/Conservation Treatments in Accordance to the Guidelines of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties, Jennifer Cagasan.....	284
APPENDIX B – Standards for the Treatment of Neon Electric Displays, Jennifer Cagasan.....	289
APPENDIX C – Special Signs Along North Interstate Avenue.....	292
APPENDIX D – Prosperity Investment Program (PIP) Grant Overview.....	293
APPENDIX E – Salt Lake City Code Title 21A.46.125: Vintage Signs.....	299
APPENDIX F – St. Petersburg City Code Title 16.40.120.13: Signs of historic significance.....	301
APPENDIX G – Saving New Mexico’s Route 66 Historic Signs brochure.....	306
APPENDIX H – Tucson Historic Landmark Sign (HLS) Treatment Plan.....	309
APPENDIX I – Vintage Tulsa Neon Signs booklet; Neon Sign Grant Process and Terms document...	312
APPENDIX J – Save Our Signs Fund – How Does it Work? handout.....	340

*“The blaze of crimson light from the tube told its own story, and it was a sight to dwell upon and never to forget...It was worth the struggle...for nothing in the world gave a glow such as we had seen.”*

*- M.W. Travers, on the discovery of neon gas<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> M. W. Travers, *The Discovery of the Rare Gases* (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1928), 96.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

There is something magical about a neon sign. The warm, inviting glow. The feeling of being *somewhere*. The knowledge that every bend in those tiny tubes was done *by hand* by a skilled artisan. Neon has an aura that is unlike anything else, and like all true art, is ultimately indescribable. This bright, attractive, ethereal quality has made the noble gas a popular choice for nighttime illumination, advertising, and art for decades, but its relationship with places and the people who inhabit them has been as varied as the colors of the rainbow it produces.<sup>2</sup>

Humans have been seeking ways to light up the night since before the advent of electricity – striving to beat back the darkness and carve out more productive hours for both work and fun. However, it was not until the late nineteenth century discovery of the inert gases that the world received the glowing beacon that would stir so much optimism, ire, and nostalgia and come to define the nighttime built environment in the decades since: the neon sign. While fervently embraced by commercial enterprise in the early to mid-twentieth century for their brightness, craftsmanship, and longevity, neon signs had fallen into what appeared to be a death spiral by the 1970s, a victim of over-saturation, lackluster maintenance, and urban flight. Architect Martin Treu’s lament on the 1986 loss of an imaginative pink flamingo-shaped neon icon in Sarasota, Florida, could be true of any city in this era: “The fate of the flamingo became commonplace...in the 1980s and 1990s, as countless vintage signs gave way to simple, plastic-faced substitutes. Significant artifacts...disappeared, and the city suffered a pronounced loss of character” (Figure 1)<sup>3</sup> Almost regulated out of existence by government beautification schemes, many neon signs nevertheless survived and even proliferated, riding the tides of popular taste and spawning a growing current movement of neon veneration, historical study, and new sign construction.

The Pacific Northwest hub of Portland, Oregon, known in the popular mind more for its abundance of handlebar mustaches and experimental foodie scene, also enjoys a collection of neon signs to rival any in the country. While often imbedded in American’s consciousness as the purview of dusty,

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<sup>2</sup> While “neon” is common parlance, it should be noted that gas-filled tube lights can be and are filled with many different noble gases, the most common being neon and argon.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Treu, *Signs, Streets, and Storefronts: A History of Architecture and Graphics along America’s Commercial Corridors* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 3.



crumbling towns or glowing meccas like the Las Vegas Strip or Times Square (both of which have increasingly transitioned to LED pictureboards), neon signs are also an important character-defining feature of this Cascadian haven. Decades without significant development pressure helped some of the city's signs survive. By virtue of their survival, these signs have lodged themselves in the city's psyche. Further, "in Portland, everything retro is still as cool as the day it was introduced."<sup>4</sup> As *Portlandia* – the wildly popular television show that helped spur the city's economic renaissance and instill a very particular image of the city in the national conscious – pointed out in 2011: "the dream of the '90s is alive in Portland." That dream includes a love for the neon-bathed hues the city's many Millennial residents grew up with and has led to a renaissance of new neon signs in Stumptown as well.

These signs, large and small, are a critical part of the city, not just downtown but throughout Portland's famous walkable neighborhood centers (Figure 2). The city's defining site is not a statue like New York or a bridge like San Francisco, but a neon sign. The White Stag sign, topping its namesake cast iron-fronted former warehouse building on the banks of the Willamette River, is seen by Portlanders daily as they cross the city's Burnside Bridge from the largely residential east bank to Old Town and downtown on the west. A waymarker for city travel, the sign's image – a white stag leaping over the words "Portland Oregon Old Town" – graces t-shirts, postcards, books, chocolate, and more, and is just as popular with locals as with tourists (Figures 3-4). "This is a proud part of the city's history," says a recent *Oregonian* newspaper article, and a "world-famous symbol of Portland."<sup>5</sup> Any proposed changes to the sign, as well as the 60-years-strong annual tradition of adding a red nose for the holidays, still makes the news.

The future is not so rosy for most of Portland's (and the country's) extant neon signage, however. Its fate is far from secure, and significant barriers exist to its conservation and continued *in situ* existence, with beloved signs continuing to disappear and others languishing in states of disrepair. Local sign companies report that neon is a diminishing part of their business. The actual work on glass tube repair (and new neon sign tube bending) is often contracted out to a small number of individual benders working independently because many sign companies do not have enough demand to employ full-time neon staff.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Andrew Kaiser, "Portland's Best Neon Signs," PDX Urban website, March 12, 2018, [www.pdxurban.com/blog/2018/3/12/portlands-best-neon-signs](http://www.pdxurban.com/blog/2018/3/12/portlands-best-neon-signs) (accessed February 12, 2020).

5 Samantha Swindler, "The White Stag Red Nose, a Portland Tradition Since 1959, Is Back," *Portland Oregonian*, November 27, 2019, [www.oregonlive.com/news/2019/11/the-white-stag-red-nose-a-portland-tradition-since-1959-is-back.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/news/2019/11/the-white-stag-red-nose-a-portland-tradition-since-1959-is-back.html) (accessed January 14, 2020).

6 Kevin Keljo (owner, Security Signs), interview with the author, November 2019.

In addition, materials can be hard to come by and skilled benders are limited, with no established trade system existing to train new artists. Historic signs are being lost all the time. In the introduction to his 2014 book on neon in Chicago, photographer Nick Freeman echoes the woes of neon sign lovers everywhere: “During my years of hunting and gathering, many signs shown in these pages have fallen to the wrecking ball....Had I started my foraging ten years earlier, I may have found twice as many signs to record. Ten years from now there may be very few still standing.”<sup>7</sup> Municipal code language in many places still reflects antiquated views of the “seediness” of neon, traditional historic preservation tools only briefly recognize signage, and few policy programs exist to financially incentivize business owners and developers to maintain their signs. Despite the excellent advocacy work happening nationwide, nonprofit organizations can only do so much to ensure decision-makers *choose* to value the neon resources under their care. Portland today is blessed with an abundance of extant neon signage that enjoys a degree of popular support. However, no unified, focused effort currently exists from the municipal and nonprofit realms to recognize, support, and protect this important collection of neon signs. As a result of this segmented, piecemeal approach, valuable resources continue to be lost. A combined, dedicated initiative is necessary to adequately protect the city’s neon inventory and ensure its long-term survival.

How, then, can the precarious position of Portland’s neon sign heritage be remedied? How can we best articulate neon’s value in a way that is compelling and influential to both policy-makers and the general public and craft a usable toolbox to ensure these signs’ long-term preservation, maintenance, and appeal? Rather than simply an outdated technology or expendable byproduct of commercialism, neon signs provide numerous civic benefits, and advocacy efforts in Portland should focus on a targeted blend of regulatory tools, economic incentives, and public outreach informed by national best practices to foster a culture that better supports the conservation and continued presence of these critical components of our shared heritage. As Thomas Rinaldi states in *New York Neon*: “As increasingly rare works of vernacular design that are significant in their own right, many historic signs...warrant active initiatives to ensure their survival.”<sup>8</sup> My project asks Portland to step up and take active measures to ensure the survival of the city’s meaningful collection of neon signs and provides a set of recommendations for how it can do so.

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<sup>7</sup> Nick Freeman, *Good Old Neon: Signs You’re in Chicago* (Chicago: Lake Claremont Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas E. Rinaldi, *New York Neon* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 176.

## **A. Methodology**

To determine appropriate recommendations for the city, this project employs a mixed methodological approach focused on historical research, case studies, and field observations. These tools provide an important historic context for neon signs and their regulation as well as real world evidence to back up recommended strategies for their preservation. By bringing in case studies from the real world, the paper shows that recommendations are not based on opinion or ideology but on proven examples of effectiveness.

In order to treat neon thoughtfully moving forward, it is critically important to understand where it has been. Neon signs have been the object of intense excitement as well as equally vehement opposition for generations. Intelligent, well-meaning individuals and organizations on both sides of the neon debate have long advocated for either their beauty and protection or their destruction as visual pollution. Over the years, neon has been subject to myriad factors affecting its prevalence in the streetscape, including heavy regulation. When historic photographs are compared with current shots taken in the field today the amount of loss is staggeringly clear. Chapter 2 uses historical research to lay out the historic context of neon's development, proliferation, regulation, and resurgence nationwide and in Portland, drawing on a number of books, theses, photographs, online and audio media, and primary source documents from the City of Portland Archives and Oregon Historical Society. It then turns to a context for Portland's neon today, beginning with an overview of the city's neon hotspots and relevant sign companies followed by short histories of representative extant individual signs. These signs were chosen to provide an overview of different types of neon signs in the city and includes the popular White Stag sign, the dynamic Portland Outdoor Store sign, the iconic Laurelhurst Theater sign, and the adapted Whole 9 Yards sign. Regular travel throughout the Portland area helped identify these signs, and field photography and conversations with owners filled out the stories.

From this context it becomes clear that for many decades beginning in the 1960s, many individuals and government bodies in Portland and elsewhere saw neon signs as an eyesore. While this view is less prevalent than it was years ago, its residual effects remain. It is therefore especially important to make the case for why effort ought to be employed to preserve neon before any argument can be made for how to do so. Drawing on a number of existing, primarily written, resources from literature to newspaper articles, I argue in Chapter 3 for five primary "values" neon signs add to the lives of communities and their inhabitants: they act as effective placemaking tools; they inspire passion; they provide a unique link to cultural heritage; they function as art; and they are environmentally friendly.

Having established the value of neon, the argument moves to the current state of neon in Chapter 4. Beginning from the national and continuing to the state perspective, I examine what kinds of resources exist for protecting neon signs, from Preservation Briefs and National Register precedents to grants and material conservation guidance. In doing so, it is evident that while some recognition and guidance does exist, there has been little work done at these higher levels specifically on neon sign preservation. This is followed by a deeper analysis of neon protection tools in Portland. To determine what protections exist for Portland neon, I focus on the growing local advocacy movement; regulations including historic resource protections, design guidelines, and sign code language; and existing incentives. I argue that, while Portland's current collection of neon signs is admirable, the state of neon in the city remains precarious and the resources currently available for saving neon are insufficient for the task.

To gather ideas and best practices in neon sign preservation that can inform policy in Portland, Chapter 5 pulls in case studies of efforts nationwide to protect neon signs. Covering a wide swath of projects, I examine efforts from both the government and nonprofit sectors as well as innovative public-private partnerships. Running the gamut from grant programs to vintage sign ordinances, historic resource surveys to printed tour guides, I show that effective preservation work is being done nationwide in communities that recognize the value of their historic neon signs, but argue that the most effective work is that which combines elements of regulation, incentives, and advocacy and outreach. Case studies focus on cities as diverse as Pocatello, Idaho; Los Angeles; and Tulsa, Oklahoma. A site visit was made to one of the national leaders in sign preservation – Tucson, Arizona – to speak with city and nonprofit leaders and examine the city's collection of neon signs.

Finally, having discussed the history and importance of neon, explained why its current preservation levels are insufficient, and gathered best practices from around the country, I culminate in Chapter 6 with a menu of recommendations for Portland. An emphasis is placed on the importance of not continuing the largely reactive, piecemeal approach that has characterized neon sign preservation in the past and replacing it with a dedicated, unified effort to protect the city's collection of signs through the coordinated application of regulations, incentives, and advocacy and outreach. In this way, I argue, true momentum can be built and the comprehensive framework necessary to ensure the survival of neon signage in the city can be established.

## **B. Scope, Limitations, and Assumptions**

Even in the niche world of neon sign preservation, there are many possible lenses through which to approach the problem. This project does not attempt to encompass all of them but rather is focused strictly on the tools of policy (through regulations and incentives) and outreach (including advocacy) that

can be employed to protect existing neon signs in Portland. It does not look at best practices for the physical preservation of neon signs (this work has been accomplished marvelously in Al Barna and Randall Ann Homan's *Saving Neon*); nor does it encroach on the excellent National Park Service (NPS) Preservation Brief 25, which offers typologies, history, treatment recommendations, and repair best practices for historic signs in general. Rather it seeks to supplement these and other well-done existing resources.

Neither does the project directly speak to the mass-produced indoor "OPEN" or beer company neon signs that proliferate across the country or examine practices that could promote the creation of *new* neon signs. While new neon is mentioned occasionally to provide context, and certain recommendations may have relevance to new neon sign creation by virtue of their approach to neon signage in general, the focus is on the preservation of existing outdoor neon. Limited programs and policies do exist nationwide to promote the proliferation of *new* neon signs. I am of the belief that a culture that values neon – new and old, indoor and outdoor – is one worth supporting, and that each benefits the other. New signs help continue the craft of neon bending and could arguably create a culture of wider support for existing neon as well, but limits of time and resources necessitate a focus here strictly on existing outdoor neon.<sup>9</sup>

Also, while my study and recommendations are geared to Portland, I believe their relevance extends beyond the Oregon city. Neon signs are everywhere – in downtowns large and small, clustered along travel arteries, and shining from storefronts that are the only commercial building in a small town –

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<sup>9</sup> I purposely try to avoid the complicated term "historic" as much as possible and instead use "existing," "old," or "vintage." In the preservation community, "historic" is an official designation used by the National Register of Historic Places and often copied by state and local governments that sets a boundary around what can be considered worthy of protection. The term entails criteria, including age, period of significance, and integrity, that preservationists utilize to separate what is considered "historic" from what is simply already built. Generally, only those "resources" (a place deemed to have historic value) that have "integrity" (an official term generally implying that a resource would be recognizable to someone from a particular period of its past) and have reached the somewhat arbitrary age of 50 – a number preservationists at the beginning of the field's professionalization in the mid-century determined was necessary for enough time to have passed for scholars (i.e., privileged and often white individuals) to accurately determine if a resource could have "significance" (another official term based on the views of scholars) – are able to earn the designation "historic." The traditional assumptions of age, integrity, and significance employed by the professional preservation practice have been contested since their inception, with alternative voices continuing to gain traction in the field. All sides of this ongoing conversation have merit, and many existing neon signs are over 50 years old, but for this project I choose not to focus on the "50 year rule" to the extent possible, which I believe can be a detriment to the appreciation and protection of resources from the recent past that are important to local communities. Part of the challenge of creating a culture that values elements of the recent past is challenging the assumption – within preservation and the larger population – that something must be a certain degree of "old" before it attains value and warrants saving. Some qualifiers must be established to form meaningful policy, but in embracing, to the extent possible, all existing neon signs as the context of this project, I seek to make headway in promoting a preservation culture that values resources that matter to people, regardless of their age.



and thus any place can benefit from the case studies and pick from among the recommendations that make the most sense for their community.

The preservation field centers on guiding philosophical approaches to the actual work being done to a resource, called *treatments*. The four treatments are based on the Secretary of the Interior's (SOI) Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties. The treatments almost exclusively employed in U.S. preservation practice are, in order of more to less original material retained: preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, and reconstruction.<sup>10</sup> This project embraces each of these treatments as valuable and worthy of consideration in neon sign conservation efforts ("conservation" encompassing all four treatments). Many signs simply need maintenance, and in these cases preservation makes sense as the preferred treatment. In other situations, little to nothing is left of the original material, and signs must be reconstructed from scratch if too little is salvageable. (Figures 5-6) Restoration is the most common treatment for neon signs and is widely used in the neon sign community to encompass any conservation work performed on a sign. For the purposes of my project, restoration encompasses both the common parlance of repairing or replacing some but not all elements of a sign (such as neon tubing, paint, cabinets) as well as the preservationist conception of returning a sign to a lost former time period. The metal cabinets and glass tubes that typically make up a neon sign are hardy materials but cannot last forever when exposed to the elements, and thus almost all neon sign conservation work must employ some degree of new material.

The final treatment is rehabilitation. Rehabilitation is when character-defining elements of the sign, such as its form and use of exposed neon tubing, are kept intact while allowing for change in other elements. This is an acceptable option in situations where businesses have changed and the former wording or imagery no longer makes sense for the new business. Many signs, such as Portland's White Stag, have been rehabilitated with new elements multiple times over the years, with the various iterations reflecting their time periods and having significance just as much as the original. While the retention of as much existing fabric and imagery as possible should be encouraged, concessions must be made to allow for the natural changeover of businesses and rehabilitation allowed when the alternative is loss of the entire sign. The application of these four treatments specifically to neon signs is explored in depth in Jennifer Cagasan's 2012 Columbia University thesis. Her summary tables are included here as Appendix

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<sup>10</sup> These are explained in detail in the NPS publication, "The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring & Reconstructing Historic Buildings" at [www.nps.gov/tps/standards/four-treatments.htm](http://www.nps.gov/tps/standards/four-treatments.htm).

A and provide a valuable tool for understanding when to apply which treatment and what kind of work is appropriate for each.

A final set of assumptions embedded within this project are criteria governing what constitutes “saving” an existing sign. These questions deal specifically with the concept of integrity, which the SOI Standards break down into seven component attributes. While all have relevance and are important to consider, integrity of materials and setting are perhaps the most contested when it comes to treatment for neon signs. Central to determining if a sign maintains integrity of materials is the question of whether increasingly popular “neon-like” exposed tubular LED lights are an acceptable substitute for neon. NPS Preservation Brief 16, “The Use of Substitute Materials on Historic Building Exteriors” lays out guidelines for when substitute materials can be considered as a replacement for a historic material and notes that substitutes are only potentially appropriate when the historic material or skilled craftsmen are unavailable, there are inherent flaws in the original material, or code-required changes are necessary. It continues:

*“Many high tech materials are too new to have been tested thoroughly...It is therefore difficult to recommend substitute materials if the historic materials are still available...consideration should always be given first to using traditional materials and methods of repair or replacement before accepting unproven techniques, materials or applications. Substitute materials must meet three basic criteria before being considered: they must be compatible with the historic materials in appearance; their physical properties must be similar to those of the historic materials, or be installed in a manner that tolerates differences; and they must meet certain basic performance expectations over an extended period of time.”<sup>11</sup>*

Given the continued availability of neon and skilled signmakers and the newness of LED technology, there are few instances when LED would be an appropriate replacement for existing neon.

SOI Standards also suggest that new materials should match the original as much as possible. Therefore, while I allow for the possibility of using LED lights, I argue against their use unless it is realistically the only feasible option, since the materiality, craftsmanship, and aesthetic quality of neon (both the glass tubes and the gas itself) is often a character-defining feature of a sign. LED is a different

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<sup>11</sup> Sharon C. Park, *Preservation Brief 16: The Use of Substitute Materials on Historic Building Exteriors* (Washington DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service Technical Preservation Services, 1988), <https://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/16-substitute-materials.htm> (accessed May 9, 2020), 6.

light source made of different materials (strings of individual unidirectional plastic diodes in a plastic tube) that gives off a harsher, cooler light than neon (omnidirectional glowing gas in a glass tube). As a directional light source, LED can also look very different depending on the angle at which it is viewed, as opposed to neon, which appears the same from all angles. Thus, replacing neon with LED can affect the integrity of a sign.<sup>12</sup> In a January 31, 2020 email exchange, Oregon State Historic Preservation Office Restoration Specialist Joy Sears mentions these same concerns and adds that the nighttime view is when the differences are most notable. She notes that these seemingly small elements of materiality are quite important, especially the closer the material is to the people viewing it<sup>13</sup>. While not ideal, however, an LED sign that looks similar to neon to the average passerby is close enough that, in my view, it is better than no sign at all or a replacement of the entire sign with backlit plastic.<sup>14</sup>

On the question of integrity of location, I align with *Saving Neon* in following a four-tiered hierarchy of preferable to least preferable outcomes: signs left in place, in the public realm at a different location, in a museum, and in a personal collection. Technically all of these outcomes retain an existing sign and are preferable to complete destruction, but I believe that public access to neon signs in their original setting better provides the many benefits I explore in Chapter 3. A relocated sign is still accessible to the public, and a museum-held sign can still play a role in educating the public about their importance. A privately held sign can potentially still bring enjoyment to many, but none of these outcomes match the public good facilitated by an *in situ* sign. Martin Treu explains why in his book *Signs, Streets, and Storefronts: A History of Architecture and Graphics Along America's Commercial Corridors*: “Although many signs may be admired as curious or beautiful artifacts in isolation, their meaning and importance cannot be fully gathered without studying them in context. Divorcing signs from their onsite role makes it all too easy to trivialize them or dismiss them as mere clutter. Their context is physical, cultural, and most especially temporal.”<sup>15</sup> In her thesis, Cagasan provides a valuable set of standards for maintenance, alteration, relocation, and removal of old signs. Her table describing

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12 The jury is still out on the appropriateness of LED as a replacement, with no official guidance from NPS on whether its use can still meet SOI Standards. The general consensus among neon enthusiasts, however, is that LED is never an acceptable replacement for neon. Thus my view provides slightly more leeway than many others' views.

13 In this sense, it may be acceptable to use LED on a large sign that is far from the human eye but unacceptable on a smaller sign where people can clearly see the difference.

14 I am not opposed to other sign materials, including backlit plastic, nor do I think that every sign must include exposed neon. However, as a replacement for neon, backlit signs dramatically change the character of the sign to an unacceptable degree.

15 Treu, *Signs, Streets, and Storefronts*, 8.

when to take each approach and best practices for doing so is included as Appendix B. My project advocates for retention of signs in place or elsewhere in the public realm where possible.

Finally, there are limits to the case study approach taken in this project. The strength of case studies is their ability to draw from the real world, creating the capacity to develop theories that can be applied elsewhere (i.e. if a strategy worked in X, and Y has similar characteristics to X, then the same strategy has a good chance of working in Y). To do so effectively, it is important to approach the studies in a scientific manner by distilling and tracking a common set of variables across several examples. There is still a degree of generalizability and guesswork here, however, as case studies, by virtue of their basis in the real world, are not subject to the strict scientific controls inherent in other methods (i.e. there may still be an unknown factor that causes a strategy that worked in X to not work in Y). In addition, selection of case studies is subject to biases and a fully representative sample is impossible.<sup>16</sup> Despite these drawbacks, the real world nature of case studies still offers an ideal way to discover best practices, which can then be used to inform recommendations for other real world application, as is the intention with this project. In addition, the case studies employed in this project are purposely diverse and the subsequent recommendations derived from them are presented as a menu rather than a prescription in an attempt to bring in as many relevant stories as possible and allow decisionmakers to choose which ones make sense based on the evidence.

### **C. Audience**

While preservationists interested in saving neon signs are a component of the audience for this project, the primary audiences are government decisionmakers with the authority to implement policy recommendations as well as nonprofit organizations and other advocates with the resources to create programming in support of neon signage. An important secondary audience is business owners of neon signs, who can gain from this project an appreciation for their signs and the importance of their preservation. It is, however, my hope that anyone interested in the preservation of neon signs can enjoy and derive value from the work of this project.

### **D. Literature Context**

The academic literature related to neon signs and especially to their preservation is rather limited, especially when compared with other, more “traditional” aspects of the built environment. Much of this

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16 Linda Groat and David Wang, *Architectural Research Methods*, 2nd edition (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

fact is certainly due to the admittedly niche nature of such objects.<sup>17</sup> Neon signs are but one element of the commercial landscape, which itself is just one subsection of the broad categorical umbrella of vernacular architecture.<sup>18</sup> Vernacular buildings represent the vast majority of all built structures but only began receiving serious academic scholarship beginning in the mid to late twentieth century. If vernacular architecture receives less scholarly attention than “high style” architecture, commercial architecture is traditionally even more of an outcast, and as objects of explicit commercialism are often regarded as somehow distinct from the mythical pure artistry that is seen to distinguish “capital-A” Architecture. While I argue that signage does indeed function as art, few elements of commercial architecture are more intertwined with the capitalist impulse than signs. Further, within the realm of signage, neon signs are but one type of illuminated sign. Considering these narrow limitations, it is perhaps not unusual that so little serious attention has been paid to neon signs. What little has been written, however, reflects a profound influence on American architecture and culture.

### ***I. Commercial Vernacular***

Serious inquiry into the history, nature, and value of commercial architecture, especially that of the 20th century, did not begin in earnest until the middle part of that century. Cultural critic Tom Wolfe touched on commercial vernacular architecture, including in the July 1969 issue of *Architectural Design*, where he coined the term “electrographic architecture” for the combination of lighting, graphics, and building in a single form that had become popular in the mid-century.

Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour’s seminal 1972 architectural treatise, *Learning from Las Vegas* presented the first in-depth study and defense of modern commercial architecture from a respected architect. The controversial and influential work represented a re-examination of city landscapes focusing on how they are experienced from the street and arguing that the signs and lights that typified “vulgar” Las Vegas-style development was not a blight on the landscape but a key contribution to the history of art and perfectly representative of the forms of mobility and expression of the time. The signs, the authors argued, responded appropriately to the modern day. Thus, *Learning from Las Vegas* was meant to encourage architects to respond more authentically to the popular culture surrounding them, rid the profession of Modernism’s elitism, and introduce symbolism back into

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17 “Objects” referring to the National Register parlance for signs and other features of a built environment that are primarily artistic and relatively small in scale relative to buildings or structures.

18 The exact definition of vernacular architecture is contested but the term generally refers to those places that are not designed by trained professionals (ironic considering that the bending of neon is a highly skilled trade traditionally taught through apprenticeship).



architecture. It was rather successful in ushering in the widespread but short-lived Postmodernist period of architecture and design (complete with its architectural and decorative neon aesthetic).

Historians and preservationists began to explore designed commercial landscapes in depth by the following decade, led by the work of Richard Longstreth and Chester Liebs. Longstreth's *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture* broke ground in 1987 by laying out a system for classifying commercial buildings of traditional American Main Streets. Put out by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's publishing arm and featuring a forward by Liebs, the book created the first true set of typologies for Main Street buildings, helping preservationists put commercial facades in a national context.

Liebs' *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* from two years earlier is perhaps the seminal entry on the specific subject of commercial *roadside* architecture (i.e. the Miracle Mile), tracing the auto-oriented commercial landscapes and buildings of mid- to late-twentieth century America that replaced earlier pedestrian-oriented downtowns (i.e. the Main Street). Blending preservation, history, and city planning, Liebs offers a guide for understanding the elements that make up this new "architecture for speed reading," including the increasing importance of signage in attracting ever faster-moving potential customers. The book served to lend further credence to the value of twentieth century commercial architecture as a subject for academic inquiry and within a decade of its release had become a common university text, inspired numerous academic articles and responses, garnered national media attention, and inspired major permanent museum exhibits.<sup>19</sup>

The story of roadside architecture was updated with an activist bent for a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience in 2012 by architect and graphic designer Martin Treu with *Signs, Streets, and Storefronts: A History of Architecture and Graphics Along America's Commercial Corridors*, which provides a chronological account of signs' influence on urban form from Main Streets to the electrification of cities and the growth of outdoor advertising all the way through to their later heavy regulation and economic revitalization efforts of the modern day. In doing so, he pays particular attention to the influence of signage on commercial architecture and the role of common, everyday signs – especially before they became more homogenized in the latter part of the twentieth century – in defining memorable and distinctive places in the collective memory. He also argues for signs as good urbanism, positing that if we would consider a

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19 Chester Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995; originally published 1985), vii.

sign “not simply as an advertisement but as an element of urban design that contributes to the character, scale, and identity of a street, we might have a richer understanding of what makes a good city.”<sup>20</sup>

In 1977, the first and only nationwide preservation nonprofit focused on commercial architecture entered the scene: the Society for Commercial Archeology (SCA). The SCA was founded by the same Chester Liebs, then chair of the Historic Preservation program at the University of Vermont.<sup>21</sup> The SCA was the first organization to gather together professional preservationists and historians to study an architecture that was still largely ignored at the time, including neon signs, and helped raise the profile of commercial architecture as worthy of serious academic study. Today, the SCA boasts around 500 members and is the nation’s largest and oldest roadside preservation nonprofit. The organization’s mission is to celebrate and preserve the signs, structures, and experiences of the twentieth century American roadscape.<sup>22</sup> The SCA today fills a unique niche in the preservation world by blurring the line between preservation advocacy organization and enthusiast group. The organization’s primary activities consist of tours and conferences featuring paper presentations on topics of roadside architectural history and preservation and six annual publications containing travel guides, scholarly architectural histories, and a regular column on historic sign news nationwide. The SCA’s biannual *SCA Journal* is a key resource for neon sign news and scholarly investigation. Commercial architecture has also been a regular feature in the conferences and publications of the Vernacular Architecture Forum, an academic organization founded in 1979 “dedicated to the appreciation and study of ordinary buildings and landscapes.”<sup>23</sup>

## ***II. Signage***

While signage, of the neon and other varieties, is mentioned in academic works on commercial architecture, book-length studies specific to signage are rare. John Jakle and Keith Sculle, however, have published a number of books on specific elements of the commercial roadside, including 2004’s *Signs in America’s Auto Age: Signatures of Landscape and Place*, which treats sign study as a kind of landscape analysis. Dealing with commercial as well as wayfinding and other signage, the book focuses on signs’ meaning and effects, including their ability to create community. Jakle also authored a related 2001 solo

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20 Treu, *Signs, Streets, and Storefronts*, 8.

21 As a note of disclosure, the author currently serves as Vice President of the SCA.

22 Society for Commercial Archeology website, <https://sca-roadside.org> (accessed December 4, 2019).

23 Vernacular Architecture Forum, [www.vernaculararchitectureforum.org](http://www.vernaculararchitectureforum.org) (accessed December 9, 2019).

work focused on nighttime illumination through the mid-century period – signage and otherwise – as a mechanism for placemaking: *City Lights: Illuminating the American Night*.

While Jakle and Sculle include neon as a major component of these works, it is artist Rudi Stern who first tackles neon as the sole focus of an entire book. In a field by himself, Stern offers a unique look at neon in his 1979 work, *Let There Be Neon* (updated in 1988 as *The New Let There Be Neon*). In it, he offers what is perhaps the most comprehensive look at the subject, capturing its history, function in the public sphere, craft, Postmodern resurgence, and most importantly, its potential as art separate from commercial signage. The first work to do so, *Let There Be Neon* effectively argues for neon's value as an artistic tool of the people separate from the sign trade yet free from the "corrupt gallery/museum circuit, which would like to keep it in a preserve away from the street and the enjoyment of the less educated mortals."<sup>24</sup> Stern promotes its use in sculpture and as an architectural element for lighting and façade embellishment. This dream was begun at his own Let There Be Neon Gallery and Workshop in New York City and taken to heart by the country's only museum dedicated to neon as art: Glendale, California's Museum of Neon Art (MONA).

If we want an in-depth understanding specifically about the history of neon signage, we have but one option. Originally published in German in 2011 and translated to English to be released by a British publisher in 2013, Christoph Ribbat's *Flickering Light: A History of Neon* is the only book-length dive into neon's past, primarily through the lens of its representation in various forms of cultural output from music and film to literature and art. While it does include some historical information, the focus is more on the use of neon internationally as a metaphor for specific places or feelings.

Each of these works on commercial architecture and signage sets a precedent for and informs the larger context in which my serious conversation about neon sign preservation is possible. While creating an academic environment where a conversation on neon sign preservation is possible, however, none of them explicitly explore the specific methods by which to do so, as my project attempts to do.

### ***III. Neon in Pop Culture***

Reception to neon in popular literature, as Ribbat notes, is robust. In fact, it is as the subject of coffee table photography books that neon is represented most abundantly in the printed form today. As of this writing, there have been no fewer than 15 neon photography books published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,

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24 Rudi Stern, *The New Let There Be Neon* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1988), vii.

including one, *Neon Road Trip*, that came out since my research began in late 2019. Many of these are specific to cities or regions, with Los Angeles inspiring three books devoted just to its neon collection.<sup>25</sup> Notably, one of the newest entries into this field is 2018's *New England Neon*.<sup>26</sup> These books vary widely in the level of history and context provided, with some offering robust histories and in-depth stories of particular signs and some devoted almost exclusively to photography. While these books tend to be put out by popular or art book publishers, they nevertheless represent an important contribution to the literature on neon signs. They represent the value placed on neon in recent decades by mass audiences spreading from San Francisco to Tucson to New York and the willingness of the popular press to venture where academics have largely feared to tread.<sup>27</sup>

Famed roadside photographer John Margolies, whose collection is held by the Library of Congress, featured neon signage prominently in his 1993 roadside signage book, *Signs of our Time*. More recently, “Ambassador of Americana” Charles Phoenix has created a career out of kitsch-heavy slide show presentations and coffee table books celebrating the commercial excess of mid-century America, including neon signs. Other forms of popular media continue to document and celebrate neon as well, and online articles on the subject are far too numerous to count. Two separate documentaries on neon were released in the mid-2010s, one by acclaimed documentarian Lawrence Johnston on the history and culture of neon and another from Poland focused on that country’s large collection (both entitled simply, *Neon*). There is even a podcast, *Mondo Neon*, devoted strictly to the art, craft, and culture of neon sign appreciation.

Many of these works do an excellent job of teasing out the importance of neon signs and inform the first half of my project. By virtue of their mass audience, however, they do not wade into the niche territory of how to preserve neon signs from a policy perspective, as my project does. Further, all of these works show a wide audience with a vested interest in neon signs who can be engaged as advocates for neon sign preservation through effective outreach.

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25 These include: Nathan Marsak, *Los Angeles Neon* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2002); Tom Zimmerman, *Spectacular Illumination: Los Angeles Neon, 1925-1965* (Santa Monica, CA: Angel City Press, 2016); and J. Eric Lynxwiler, *Signs of Life: Los Angeles Is the City of Neon* (Los Angeles: Photo Friends of the Los Angeles Public Library, 2017).

26 While places like New England that developed well before neon became available may not be traditionally associated with the form, this book shows that they in fact not only embraced neon but continue to contain enough neon fans to warrant publication of a book in the popular press.

27 No such work exists for Portland, Oregon.

#### **IV. Preservation**

Finally, most directly relevant to the subject of this paper are writings specifically covering the preservation of neon signage, a topic whose coverage to date reflects its niche status. Most of what is written about neon either completely ignores preservation or just briefly touches on it, focusing more on history, art, and culture. Typical of the treatment preservation often gets in the vast coffee table book literature is the few paragraphs devoted to it in Rinaldi's *New York Neon*, which vaguely recommends surveying signs, documenting them, and raising money for their preservation. National sign expert and regular *SCA Journal* contributor Debra Jane Seltzer also includes a section on sign preservation in her recent *Vintage Signs of America*, where she provides an overview of the challenges facing neon signs and some efforts – including the establishment of museums and sign parks – to preserve them in collections.

The preservation field establishment was initially slow to see the value of historic signage, as evidenced in the NPS Preservation Brief 11, “Rehabilitating Historic Storefronts,” written in 1982 and not updated since to reflect more progressive current views.<sup>28</sup> Neon is not specifically mentioned and is thus spared the brunt of the author’s anti-sign scree, which labels 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century commercial signage as “confusion,” noting that “removal of some signs can have a dramatic effect in improving the visual appearance of a building.”<sup>29</sup> The focus is squarely on building fabric, and thus signs are seen as barriers standing between a viewer and good architecture. The only historic signs deemed worthy of saving are those painted on historic walls. Along with unfortunately failing to understand the importance of signage as part of the complete story of a place, this view also does not engage with the commercial architecture of the mid-century period, where the importance of signage as architecture grew even stronger, and an update is certainly in order.

The NPS had effectively reversed course, however, with the 1991 release of Preservation Brief 25, “The Preservation of Historic Signs,” which directs considerable attention to neon. Its publication marked an important turning point in the preservation world for its official recognition of the historic value old signs can possess independent of their association with a building. Its strong encouragement for the preservation of historic signs as contributors rather than detractors from significance and powerful arguments against overly prescriptive sign codes is laudable. However, its nearly 30-year age without

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28 Preservation briefs serve as a sort of preservation “bible,” guiding the work of preservation professionals across the country.

29 H. Ward Jandl, *Preservation Brief 11: Rehabilitating Historic Storefronts* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service Technical Preservation Services, 1982), [www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/11-storefronts.htm](http://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/11-storefronts.htm) (accessed December 24, 2019).

updates means newer thinking and technologies are not mentioned. Notably absent is discussion of the importance of proactively inventorying local signs and the implications of the rapid recent ascendance of LED lighting as a neon replacement.

Other smaller, more recent efforts have included the New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance's c.2003 "Saving New Mexico's Route 66 Historic Signs" brochure. The small brochure makes the case to municipalities and business owners that neon signs are worth saving (and adapting when necessary) while encouraging sign-friendly code language and resource inventories. Another important contribution to sign preservation literature was recently made by the nonprofit group San Francisco Neon in *Saving Neon*, a booklet devoted solely to the tactics of neon conservation. This work focuses primarily on the technical and physical best practices for sign conservation, however, and only briefly discusses the regulations, incentives, and public advocacy and outreach that form much of preservation practice. In many ways, my project hopes to work in tandem with *Saving Neon* to create a valuable toolkit with which to forward the goal of neon sign preservation from all angles.

My project is also not the first sign-related terminal project to come out of the University of Oregon's historic preservation program. Preservation consultant George Kramer's 1989 thesis "Preserving Historic Signs in the Commercial Landscape: The Impact of Regulation" provides an excellent overview of the history and mechanics of sign regulation and its impact in different Oregon cities. With a focus on sign codes, the paper also presents a well thought out strategy of code changes and inventory that could be used to protect significant signs. While Kramer's thesis proved informative to my own, its focus is at once more narrow (focused strictly on regulations) and more broad (considering multiple types of signage) than my own.

More recent and more closely aligned with my project are the 2012 Columbia University thesis of Jennifer Cagasan and the 2016 University of Southern California thesis of Lannette Schwartz. Cagasan's thesis, "A Methodology for Preserving Las Vegas Neon Electric Displays," provides a comprehensive approach to the treatment of neon signs. She examines the history of neon nationally and in the local Las Vegas context; provides an overview of then current preservation tools in Las Vegas; identifies three primary values of neon signs (historic, social, and aesthetic, complete with sign typologies); explores why signs decay and prescribes physical remediation options; surveys and develops a preservation plan for the Neon Museum collection; and presents various methodologies and recommends standards for preserving signs *in situ*. Cagasan's approach is both broader and more prescriptive than my own, with more of a focus on physical conservation and the application of the SOI Standards, but it was instrumental in my thinking of how to structure and organize my own project.

In “Conserving Historic Commercial Signs in Hollywood, California,” Schwartz, who currently works as a dedicated sign conservation consultant (doing business as Historic Sign Conservation), picks apart the inadequate current sign protection policy in the famous Los Angeles neighborhood and argues for a stand-alone sign program based on that of Tucson, Arizona, comprised of a survey, registry, treatment plan, and financial incentives plan. Schwartz’s work, while not narrowly focused on neon signs, nevertheless provides an excellent opening to the conversation on how policy and incentives can be put to work to preserve historic signs, and it is this conversation that I hope to add to with my project.

Thus, it is not wholly unexpected that a topic at once so common to everyday experience but so specific in nature is but scantily represented in scholarship about the built environment but robustly covered in popular media. Missing from all of this work, however, is a thorough study of how to apply the traditional tools of the historic preservation profession – regulation, incentives, and advocacy and outreach – to neon signs. It is my sincere hope that my project can fill this gap and propel serious inquiry into how cities like Portland can apply practical measures to save their neon streetscapes.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORIC CONTEXT OF NEON SIGNAGE AND ITS REGULATION

*“The creation and spread of infrastructures of artificial light...was as fundamental to modernization as any system of transportation, communication or energy, and as momentous as industrial urbanization itself.”*

*- Cities of Light: Two Centuries of Urban Illumination* <sup>30</sup>

In the preservation field, understanding the historic context of a resource type like neon is critical before any discussion of preservation methods can begin. Without first understanding what we are looking at, where it came from, and which forces have led to its current situation, it is impossible to effectively prescribe solutions. In other words, an understanding of the past and present is critical to decision-making for the future. Thus, I begin with a general overview of the history of neon signs in America followed by a discussion of the local historic and current context in Portland.

#### A. National Context

##### *I. Development and Heyday (1890s-1940s)*

Neon may shine brightly in the popular mindset as *the* image of urban illumination, but it was far from the first way that humans lit the darkness. Fire was the only option for millennia, but experiments revealed the nascent lighting potential of gasses as early as the 1600s. An Italian physicist and student of Galileo, Evangelista Toricelli researched atmospheric pressure in what became known as “Toricelli’s Tube” (a mercury-filled glass tube barometer). Further experiments with his teacher revealed that mercury in a glass tube vacuum under low pressure caused the mercury contents to glow when shaken.<sup>31</sup> It would be centuries before this illuminating quality was exploited for signage, however, with gaslamps providing the earliest sign illumination. Called shadow-boxes, painted lanterns, or silhouettes, the illumination of the early 1800s consisted of wood boxes perforated with letters or shapes and lit from within by an open flame. An illuminated sign industry had emerged in America by the end of the century,

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30 Sandy Isenstadt, Margaret Maile Petty, and Dietrich Neumann, eds., *Cities of Light: Two Centuries of Urban Illumination* (New York: Routledge, 2015), xvii.

31 Melissa Johnson, *Spectacular: A History of Las Vegas Neon* (Las Vegas: Neon Museum, 2012).



with metal replacing wood as a cabinet choice to prevent fires, and openings beginning to be fit with glass lenses. (Figure 7)

Electricity arrived with Thomas Edison's incandescent bulbs in 1879 and marked the beginning of the end for the "dirty, hot, dangerous" gaslights that preceded it. Edison had pioneered a commercial system of electrical distribution by 1882. His associate William J. Hammer debuted the first electric sign (using bamboo filaments) that same year at London's Crystal Palace as part of the International Electrical Exhibition. In true commercial fashion, the display spelled out "Edison." Incandescent lights create light by passing a current through a filament until it heats to the point of glowing, and its use marked the birth of electric lighting.<sup>32</sup> Giant "spectaculars" began to appear in cities, notably New York, where the first large electric sign appeared in the Flatiron District at a hulking 80x50 feet. It featured 1,457 lights and created the appearance of motion thanks to a full-time manual operator cranking the sign from dusk until 11:00pm each night (Figure 8).<sup>33</sup> The popularity of incandescents grew over the following decades to the point that by 1917, 200 electric sign permits were issued per month in New York City alone.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, however, experimentation on gas tube lighting continued in Europe. These "gas discharge lamps" create light by forming a sealed vacuum and sending an electrical current across the gap between electrodes at either end to complete the circuit. Light is produced when a gas within the tube conducts the electric charge across the gap, which excites the electrons and produces light.

German physicist Heinrich Geissler is credited with inventing the first gas tube light in 1857, but his Geissler tubes suffered from being too dim to have much practical appeal. D. McFarlan Moore, an Edison associate backed by Nicola Tesla, debuted the Moore tube at the 1896 American Institute of Electrical Engineers convention in New York. Using carbon dioxide, the Moore tube was marketed as a competitor to incandescents, and its potential to use bent glass to form letters was immediately exploited as an advertising tool. (Figure 9) Moore tubes enjoyed some success and were on display in Paris's Grand Palais in 1910 where "The Father of Neon" Georges Claude came across them and decided to experiment by filling a Moore tube with neon gas (Figure 10). Neon, named for the Greek word for "new," had been discovered in 1898 by British chemists Sir William Ramsay and Morris William Travers, along with krypton and xenon, as naturally occurring products of experiments they conducted in

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<sup>32</sup> Rinaldi, *New York Neon*, 14.

<sup>33</sup> Stern, *The New Let There Be Neon*; Flatiron 23rd Street Partnership, "Discover Flatiron: Electric Signage Debuts in the District 125 Years Ago," January 23, 2017, [www.flatirondistrict.nyc/discover-flatiron/flatiron-history/7/discover-flatiron-electric-signage-debuts-in-the-district-125-years-ago](http://www.flatirondistrict.nyc/discover-flatiron/flatiron-history/7/discover-flatiron-electric-signage-debuts-in-the-district-125-years-ago) (accessed March 31, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> Rinaldi, *New York Neon*, 14.

the liquification of air. These and other “noble gasses”<sup>35</sup> were discovered to glow when placed in a vacuum and electrically charged. The difficulty of obtaining isolated neon for experimentation in the following decades, however, kept it from being widely exploited as a light source until Georges Claude’s experiments led him to file for patents on neon lighting first in France and then the U.S. by 1911.<sup>36</sup> The U.S. patent was finally granted on January 19, 1915.<sup>37</sup>

Along with expanding on Moore’s tubes by introducing neon, Claude also improved the electrodes and succeeded in eliminating many of the impracticalities of earlier gas tube lighting. Neon light is naturally a red-orange color, which didn’t actually work very well for general illumination, and it was Claude associate Jacques Fonseque who came up with the idea to use the new technology for signage.<sup>38</sup> The multitude of vibrant colors we now associate with neon signs comes from various combinations of other gasses (such as mercury and argon) and colored glass.<sup>39</sup> The first commercial neon sign appeared in 1912 at Paris’ Palais Coiffer barbershop, and by the end of World War I it had become a fashion icon, symbolizing modernity and contributing to Paris’ reputation as the “City of Lights.”<sup>40</sup>

Though Claude attempted to sell General Electric a license to use his patented electrode in the U.S., he was unsuccessful and decided instead to franchise his stateside operations out of New York. It was established national companies, like Standard Oil, who were the first to embrace neon in America, with a Los Angeles Packard dealer creating a “traffic-stopping sensation” when one of the country’s first Claude Neon signs was erected in 1923 (Figure 11).<sup>41</sup> Neon signs were cheaper to run and easier to maintain than incandescents because they used a fraction of the energy and didn’t require constantly changing out individual bulbs. Their sleek style was also well suited for the curves of the increasingly popular Art Deco and Art Moderne styles of architecture. Thus their popularity spread quickly among

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35 “Noble” refers to the gases’ ability to resist chemical reactions. All noble gases occur naturally in the earth’s atmosphere, with neon comprising 0.00046% of the air we breathe (Christoph Ribbat, *Flickering Light: A History of Neon* [London: Reaktion Books, 2013]).

36 Rinaldi, *New York Neon*.

37 Susan Mara Bregman, *New England Neon* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2018).

38 Rinaldi, *New York Neon*.

39 Prior to the mid-1930s, colors were still limited to red, blue, and green, with additional phosphorescent colors such as pink arriving in the U.S. from Europe around that time (Paul Greenstein, interview with Nick Redding, *PreserveCast* [podcast audio], July 24, 2017, [www.preservecast.org/2017/07/24/paul-greenstein-neon-sign-preservation-and-restoration](http://www.preservecast.org/2017/07/24/paul-greenstein-neon-sign-preservation-and-restoration)).

40 Ribbat, *Flickering Light*; Rinaldi, *New York Neon*. Unfortunately, Ribbat does not note the public’s reaction to the birth of this new typology.

41 Johnson, *Spectacular*. The previously held view that the LA Packard sign was America’s first neon sign has begun to be contested. See, for example, Tom Zimmerman, *Spectacular Illumination: Los Angeles Neon, 1925-1965* (Santa Monica CA: Angel City Press, 2016); Isenstadt, Petty, and Neumann, *Cities of Light*.

large companies and small businesses alike, becoming “a symbol of glamour and progress – a way of showing the world you were up to date.”<sup>42</sup> Growth was especially strong in the West where electrical current was gauged at 60 cycles per second, as opposed to the East where older systems cycled current as low as 25 cycles per second, which lent the neon lights an inconsistent flicker.<sup>43</sup> It was also promoted heavily by electric utilities, who were producing excesses of energy and saw neon as an opportunity to bring demand in line with supply.<sup>44</sup> In the ensuing decade, Claude was constantly going to court to attempt (largely unsuccessfully) to limit the use of neon signs by a growing number of competitors seeking to cash in on neon’s popularity, claiming that his patent protected his sole ability to produce neon signs. When his U.S. patent expired in 1932, however, the floodgates opened.

The 1930s was the height of neon signage, a time when over 2,000 neon plants produced the markers that lit American’s lives.<sup>45</sup> “Neon in America meant progress, vitality, urban excitement. It symbolized America’s energy.”<sup>46</sup> Neon’s exuberance and creativity were especially well-suited to the growing travel and leisure industry and became part of the vernacular of theaters, diners, lodging, and more. “With the hum of transformer and a fusion of electricity and gas, logos and language ignite into a frenzy of identity in the evening sky. Neon signs attract patrons to extravagant apartments, hotels and theaters, beacons of a vibrant nightlife and social climate.”<sup>47</sup> It was certainly not limited to these businesses, however. Neon signs graced virtually every place of commerce across the country, especially in urban centers and along arterial roadways catering to the growing population of automobile owners. “Catering to a new form of lust, signs were exuberant, spontaneous, and joyfully individualized, a razzle-dazzle trumpeting of goods and services to a nation on the move.”<sup>48</sup> Along these burgeoning auto routes, “the close and regular spacing of the signs on both sides of the roadway created a virtual colonnade leading into town – especially at night, when most other roadside distractions disappeared in the darkness. The bright intensity of the signs and their great number contributed to a sense of enclosure on the road. Their character and form established a unique sense of place.”<sup>49</sup>

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42 Adolfo Nodal and Michael Webb, “A Guide to Neon Lights along the Wilshire Corridor” (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department and California Institute of the Arts, 1999); text available at [www.publicartinla.com/neon\\_signs/neon\\_guide.html](http://www.publicartinla.com/neon_signs/neon_guide.html) (accessed March 25, 2020).

43 John A. Jakle, *City Lights: Illuminating the American Night* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

44 Stern, *The New Let There Be Neon*.

45 Johnson, *Spectacular*.

46 Ibid., 36.

47 Nodal and Webb, “A Guide to Neon Lights along the Wilshire Corridor.”

48 John Margolies and Emily Gwathmey, *Signs of Our Time* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), 9.

49 Treu, *Signs, Streets, and Storefronts*, 3-4.

World's Fairs in the 1930s prominently featured neon as well. The 1933-1934 Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago enhanced the cachet of neon lighting with 55-foot cascades of green and blue light following the contours of the Electric Building and fountains colored by underwater neon lights.<sup>50</sup> The 1939 World of Tomorrow fair in New York also shone with neon, including a large sign for General Motors' Futurama pavilion.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, New Deal efforts to modernize America's storefronts led to \$5 billion being spent to update businesses, their facades, and their signs in 8,000 communities nationwide, often with neon.<sup>52</sup> All these efforts reinforced that not only was neon one of the greatest developments of the twentieth century, but it was also the way of the future.

The rapid growth of neon signage took the country by storm, its beauty and popularity evidenced by its sheer abundance in the landscape during these early years. This same incredible popularity set the stage for a backlash in the coming years, however, as "roadside signage evolved into a more visually aggressive medium in an effort to capture the attention of the fast-moving viewer."<sup>53</sup>

## ***II. Image Changes and Regulation (1950s-1970s)***

The postwar period was a time of transition and contradiction for neon signs, falling victim to neglect in urban areas while continuing to be embraced in the growing suburbs. Neon signs were prevalent along suburban arterial strips in the 1950s (and growing in size thanks to the need to command the attention of ever faster-moving automobile drivers), but the perception and popularity of the form was beginning to change. By the late 1960s, neon had largely transitioned in the public mind from exciting marker of luxury and cosmopolitan urbanity into a symbol of urban blight and ecological irresponsibility. By the 1970s new neon production had slowed to a crawl – replaced by more affordable plastic options – and existing signs stood out as antiques.<sup>54</sup> With reduced demand came reduced availability of materials and fewer artisans available to make neon signs, and by the 1980s the previous high of 2,000 neon plants

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<sup>50</sup> Stern, *The New Let There Be Neon*.

<sup>51</sup> Sarah Archer, "A Brief History of Neon Signage in Cities," CityLab website, April 30, 2019, [www.citylab.com/design/2019/04/neon-signage-20th-century-history/588400](http://www.citylab.com/design/2019/04/neon-signage-20th-century-history/588400) (accessed January 7, 2020).

<sup>52</sup> Gabrielle Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street: Architecture and Consumer Culture in the New Deal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Ironically, this same modernization impetus has led to the scrapping and replacement of untold numbers of neon signs in the decades since.

<sup>53</sup> Johnson, *Spectacular*, 12.

<sup>54</sup> Rinaldi, *New York Neon*. It should also be mentioned that while neon did experience a comeback in the following decades and signs did begin to be preserved, Rinaldi notes that many of the historic signs he saw in 1980s New York as curiosities were gone when he returned in 2004.

in the late 1930s had dwindled to a mere 250.<sup>55</sup> These became challenging times for neon signs, spurred by image problems, changing ways of life, and increased corporatization.

a. *A Time of Transition*

Complaints against neon were not new in the postwar period, just more widespread. Neither were criticisms of signage in general a new phenomenon (Figure 12). Early critics of neon signs called them everything from “wickedly red” to “a disgrace to any planet” to “more ridiculous than anything savages ever invented.”<sup>56</sup> The signs were seen by some as products of an era lacking substance, their artificial glow suggesting a divorce from pastoral “reality” and symbolic of all that was wrong with modern society. These views remained fringe until after the second world war, however, when Nelson Algren’s gritty 1947 short story collection *The Neon Wilderness* became the first to equate neon signage with drugs, prostitution, and a crime-ridden underworld.<sup>57</sup>

This new dystopian image for urban neon became pervasive in the ensuing decades. Neon was often depicted buzzing and flickering in films to represent not urban vitality but urban decay to the point of becoming a trope. From 1946’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* to 1989’s *Back to the Future: Part II*, neon was employed to represent sinister alternate future versions of idyllic small-town life where sin and vice had taken over (Figure 13). When the term “film noir” was first used in 1968, it specifically called out neon signs as a key element of the dark genre.<sup>58</sup> By the 1970s, even Las Vegas casinos saw themselves as too “clean” for neon as they started replacing the technology in an effort to convey a more family-friendly image.<sup>59</sup>

There was no single cause for this slide in public perception. Businesses that could not survive the Depression would often leave behind neon signs to languish and decay, sometimes becoming safety hazards. Mandatory blackouts during the war years meant many sign owners were not able to light their signs, causing maintenance to slip.<sup>60</sup> Following the war, American culture was characterized by the idea

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<sup>55</sup> Johnson, *Spectacular*.

<sup>56</sup> Ribbat, *Flickering Light*, 30. These religious and racist overtones suggest the vehemence with which critics disliked the introduction of neon to America.

<sup>57</sup> This literary trope had considerable staying power. James Lee Burke’s *The Neon Rain* (1987), Matt and Bonnie Taylor’s *The Neon Flamingo* (1987), Tony Kenrick’s *Neon Tough* (1988), Mark McGarrity’s *Neon Caesar* (1989), and Dick Lochte’s *The Neon Smile* (1995), and are but a few of the many books that continued to lean on the image of neon to evoke violence and crime well into the late 20th Century (Ribbat, *Flickering Light*).

<sup>58</sup> Rinaldi, *New York Neon*.

<sup>59</sup> Sheila Swan and Peter Laufer, *Neon Nevada* (Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot Press, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> Isenstadt, Petty, and Neumann, *Cities of Light*.

of a new day dawning and a desire to break with old ways of being (and old ways of advertising) in the world. At the same time, there was a massive exodus of wealthy white Americans away from cities and into newly sprawling suburbs. Neon, as a primary feature of cities, was dragged through the mud of “urban decline” along with many other features of the cities wealthy Americans left *en masse* in the postwar years.

Despite urban neon becoming a symbol for danger and decline, the form was able to successfully follow the exodus to the suburbs in the 1950s and was still seen as a vibrant and effective marketing tool so long as it remained outside the central city. The brightness and “look at me!” qualities inherent in neon signs lent themselves well to the optimism and exuberance of Googie and other over-the-top 1950s commercial architecture. Much of this architecture was being built not in downtowns but in newly sprawling suburbs and the arterial roads connecting them to one another and to cities. As automobile traffic grew and became a more common method of transportation for the average American, signs needed to be even bigger and brighter to compete for the attention of the fast-moving motorist, and neon fit the bill well. The neon light show along one of the era’s most famous motorways, Route 66, is described poetically: “The streets were illuminated with a palette of ruby reds, sapphire blues, and emerald greens that broadcast promises of adventure, discovery, and gratification. Neon cowboys, Indians, sombreros, teepees, cactus, longhorn steers, thunderbirds, swallows, wiener dogs, ponies, and other critters and characters would come out at night to greet visitors.”<sup>61</sup>

GIs returning from the war fueled production during this time as many found work in the hundreds of neon sign shops that continued to dot cities big and small. As it had in the cities in previous decades, however, the sheer volume of signage and commercial development of the mid-century period eventually spawned a backlash. The suburban growth that was originally viewed as modern and optimistic was later “shunned as being incoherent, cacophonous, and chaotic.”<sup>62</sup>

Suburbanization was also accompanied by corporatization, and its effects on neon were profound. The NPS Preservation Brief 25 “The Preservation of Historic Signs” clearly describes the effect:

*Another profound influence on signs in this period stemmed from business trends rather than from technological breakthroughs or design movements: the rise of chain stores and franchises.*

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61 Johnnie V., “2003 Route 66 Neon Restoration,” New Mexico Route 66 Association website, [www.rt66nm.org/new/preservation/restoration.html](http://www.rt66nm.org/new/preservation/restoration.html) (accessed December 17, 2019).

62 Peter G. Rowe, *Making a Middle Landscape* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 56.

*National firms replaced many local businesses. Standard corporate signs went up; local trademarks came down. The rise of mass culture, of which the national chain is but one expression, has meant the rise of standardization, and the elimination of regional differences and local character.*<sup>63</sup>

By the 1960s that standardization had largely “replaced creative and elegant neon with homogenous, plastic signs that could be produced cheaply and *en masse*.”<sup>64</sup>

Society at large continued to change as well. Just as the postwar period desired to start anew and eschew images of the Depression and war, so too did the countercultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s seek to distance itself from the postwar period. If neon had succeeded in moving to the suburbs in the 1950s, the later countercultural reaction to what it perceived as the consumerist excesses of its parents’ generation saw little place for the bright lights. Simon and Garfunkel’s 1964 hit “Sounds of Silence” epitomizes this association with excess and artificiality when it laments “my eyes were stabbed by the flash of a neon light” and “the people bowed and prayed / To the neon god they made.” With the rise of the environmental movement came a dramatic change in architecture and signage. Large, loud signs sucking electricity and urging consumers to spend, spend, spend came to be seen as irresponsible and ostentatious in this more subdued architectural period, and business owners followed suit, replacing neon with plastic. Signs primarily composed of acrylic resin plastic panels (Plexiglas and others) accompanied by fluorescent lights, standard typefaces, and standard corporate logos were cheaper because they could be produced by machines, required less maintenance than neon, and had few negative connotations at the time (Figure 14).<sup>65</sup> By the 1970s, 75% of neon production was as a hidden rather than external light source and the lack of demand meant the end of production for certain colors of tinted glass and thus the disappearance of entire color schemes from the repertoire.<sup>66</sup> While these societal factors certainly contributed to the loss of scores of neon signs nationwide, the effect they had on public policy caused not just the slow decline of neon but its purposeful, coordinated removal.

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63 Michael J. Auer, *Preservation Brief 25: The Preservation of Historic Signs* (Washington DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service Technical Preservation Services, 1991), [www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/25-signs.htm](http://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/25-signs.htm) (accessed October 30, 2019).

64 Neon historian Eric Lynxwiler in Al Barna, *San Francisco Neon: Survivors and Lost Icons* (San Francisco: Giant Orange Press, 2014), 134.

65 Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile*; Rinaldi, *New York Neon*.

66 Stern, *The New Let There Be Neon*.

*b. Regulations*

Beginning in earnest in the early 1960s, anti-sign attitudes in America began to be codified. From sign ordinances to beautification schemes to sign industry PR campaigns, the war on neon during this time led to the purposeful elimination of countless neon signs nationwide. Sign regulation was not new in the 1960s, but it was intensified. In 17<sup>th</sup> century Paris, Louis XIV ordered the removal of medieval shop signs for obstructing traffic and views. In 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, unscrupulous advertisers put ads directly onto natural features, leading to the formation of the British Society for Checking the Abuses of Public Advertising in 1893. Sign bans in sections of New York City appeared as early as the 1910s.<sup>67</sup> At the same time the City Beautiful movement in landscape design and town planning was attacking large man-made elements of the built environment as a virus that infected naturally beautiful places.

The legal basis for sign regulation comes from the plenary police power held by states but often passed to municipalities. These powers allow cities to regulate nuisances and broadly work for the public welfare. Early attempts to use these powers to regulate signs were unsuccessful, with courts finding that signs were an issue of aesthetics rather than safety and not subject to a city's policing power. The landmark 1954 Supreme Court case of *Berman v. Parker*, however, reversed this precedent, opening the door to the regulation of "beauty."<sup>68</sup> The decision set off a decade of debate, with the American Planning Association noting, "Perhaps no environmental or land-use issue evoked more discussion and debate during the 1950s and 1960s than did aesthetics and sign control."<sup>69</sup>

First Lady Lady Bird Johnson became a fierce advocate for "beautification" during her husband's tenure in the White House and helped organize the 1965 White House Conference on Natural Beauty. Broad in scope, the conference coalesced and provided a platform for desires to eliminate elements of the built environment not seen as beautiful to the largely older, white, upper class power brokers of the time. Burying utility cables, banning billboards from highways, and removing junkyards from the public view were all part of an effort to replace vaguely-defined "endless corridors walled in by neon, junk, and ruined landscape" with "pleasing vistas and attractive roadside scenes."<sup>70</sup> Federal efforts to control

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<sup>67</sup> Rinaldi, *New York Neon*.

<sup>68</sup> George H. Kramer, "Preserving Historic Signs in the Commercial Landscape: The Impact of Regulation" (master's thesis, University of Oregon, 1989).

<sup>69</sup> Charles F. Floyd, "Billboard Control under the Highway Beautification Act – A Failure of Land Use Controls," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 45, no 2 (1979): 115-126, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944367908976949>, 115.

<sup>70</sup> Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile*, 65.



beauty had begun years earlier, with the Bonus Act of 1958 encouraging states to control billboards by offering federal-aid highway bonuses to those that did. The biggest win for this “America the Beautiful” initiative, however, was the 1965 Highway Beautification Act (HBA) calling for the removal of certain types of signs and other “clutter” along Interstates and federal highways. The HBA expanded on the Bonus Act by making participation mandatory, requiring states to clear away billboards within 660 feet of Interstates of other federal-aid highways. Over time, however, ill-defined commercial and industrial zones became exempt, and on-premise signs were never regulated. Additionally, the law required compensation to business owners for sign removal but did not provide states with the funding to do so.<sup>71</sup> While the HBA had little teeth and was lightly enforced, it did increase the dialogue surrounding signage as blight and showed the power anti-sign advocates had amassed.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, while it did not directly ban neon signs, by elevating the idea that signs were blight it certainly encouraged the removal of neon signs and “snuffed out the spark for neon benders across the country.”<sup>73</sup> (Figure 15)

The sign companies that employed many of those neon benders in fact became bandleaders for Johnson’s campaign and some of the staunchest advocates for the removal of neon signs, which had increasingly come to be seen as not only outdated but as safety hazards to drivers. In an effort to “elevat[e] its image from obscurity,” boost the perception among legislators and the public of a “problem child” industry, and generate new business, the sign industry “declared war on derelict, abandoned signs” in the 1960s.<sup>74</sup> Beginning in May 1965 in Columbus, Ohio, local sign companies began banding together to remove old neon signs at their own expense in weekend events complete with ceremonies featuring business and civic leaders, parades of sign equipment (including “sign queens”), and copious media coverage. Oregon had its own statewide cleanup day called the War Against Scenic Pollution (WASP) sponsored by the Electrical Advertising Institute. These efforts were so successful that the campaign soon went national. In the largest coordinated effort ever made by the American sign industry, the National Electric Sign Association launched the nationwide Scrap Old Signs initiative (SOS) in 1966. Instruction kits on how to carry out SOS programs were distributed to member organizations across the country, and over a dozen cities took up the torch, all participating in a single PR-fueled week-long blitz. Boston

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71 Floyd, “Billboard Control under the Highway Beautification Act.”

72 John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *Signs in America’s Auto Age: Signatures of Landscape and Place* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2004).

73 Chris Dovi, “Lady Bird’s Other Legacy: Neon Killer,” *Richmond Style Weekly*, July 18, 2007, [www.styleweekly.com/richmond/lady-birds-other-legacy-neon-killer/Content?oid=1384023](http://www.styleweekly.com/richmond/lady-birds-other-legacy-neon-killer/Content?oid=1384023), (accessed January 9, 2020).

74 “Scrap Old Signs Program Creates a New Image,” *Signs of the Times*, November 1966, 39-41, 120: 39.

became the initiative's poster child, removing 300 neon signs in a single day. Trade magazine *Signs of the Times* declared the week a victory, claiming it "generated a sweeping wave of endorsement that cannot be denied," especially among city administrators who saw the efforts as free city development.<sup>75</sup> The program was seen as impactful enough that many local efforts became ongoing annual events. (Figure 16)

With the SOS program, sign companies were responding to larger public perception issues and seeking the good graces of city officials.<sup>76</sup> With their new power to regulate beauty, municipalities almost unanimously began creating and enforcing stricter sign ordinances during these decades. While codes differed from city to city, most shared the regulation of number, size, type, placement, illumination, motion, and contextual compatibility of signs. These codes often not only governed what could be built moving forward, but often provided little or no opportunity for vesting of existing signs, requiring the immediate removal of non-conforming signs or setting a date a few years into the future when all signs must meet code.<sup>77</sup> Where old signs were allowed to stay up, they were often not allowed to be re-purposed on site or go back up if they needed to come down for repair. Codes often insisted that old, non-conforming signs that needed to be re-purposed to have economic value for new businesses or come off their posts for effective conservation were *new* signs and thus non-conforming and illegal. The effect of these policies was encouraging either the decay of historic signs or their wholesale replacement with modern substitutes, thus regulating out of existence decades of cultural artifacts from the historic record. Old neon signs were being lost not just because of attrition but because of forced, top-down policies. Historian Martin Treu notes that this "radically reductive new legislation...explains more destruction than has previously been acknowledged."<sup>78</sup>

These trends continue to some extent even today. Roadside advertising remains prevalent except in the few states where it continues to be banned, and non-profits such as the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood and Scenic America continue to advocate for removal of advertising signage

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> They may also have sought new business and higher profit margins. The removal of a sign often meant a business would need a new one, and the modern plastic signs of the day were quicker and cheaper to produce than neon.

<sup>77</sup> Auer, *The Preservation of Historic Signs*. The term "vesting" has risen to prominence in recent years as substitute for "grandfathering," or allowing a pre-existing condition to remain despite regulatory changes.

<sup>78</sup> Treu, *Signs, Streets, and Storefronts*, 7.

nationwide.<sup>79</sup> Further, while codes have loosened to some extent, many still retain ideologies hostile to neon signs. As recently as December 2019, news broke that the city of DeLand, Florida was cracking down on nonconforming signs, beginning enforcement of a 1999 ordinance with 10-year grace period that had been extended three previous times. Citing a 20-year effort to make the city's aesthetics cohesive and an effort to maintain fairness to businesses that complied with code over those past decades, the city is forcing the removal of a dozen, mostly large mid-century signs. Opponents of the move see it as "a needless stifling of creativity, and a destruction of part of the city's recent history." When one business posted the plight of their sign beloved to the community on social media, she received 120 comments, nearly all in support of the sign. In response, the city said she could apply for a competitive grant of up to \$2500 to purchase a new sign that meets code (meaning the loss of a historic sign and its replacement with a much cheaper, smaller, neon-free alternative) or a hardship variance (both of which are burdensome processes with no guarantee of success).<sup>80</sup>

### *c. The Culpability of Historic Preservation*

With such wanton destruction of historic objects of the built environment occurring throughout the country, the historic preservation movement might have been expected to be a vocal opponent. In fact, the opposite was true for many decades and to some extent still today. Major national organizations that may have stepped in to save signs – including the National Trust for Historic Preservation, NPS, and American Planning Association – simply did not see them as important. While rarely openly commending the destruction of signs, the preservation movement of the time was built largely on a deification of original building fabric, the result being a general lack of concern for additions like signs. Because many then-existing neon signs would not yet have reached the 50-year mark generally considered necessary for an object to be considered "historic," neon signs were largely regarded as pimples on unblemished buildings, problem spots to be erased to remove visual confusion. "Preservationists," Treu states, "continued to judge historic signs of all kinds for their temporary aesthetic

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<sup>79</sup> George Kramer's University of Oregon thesis from 1989 notes some of the ways codes continued to limit neon signs at the time: In Ashland, all "exposed sources of illumination" (including neon) were banned ("Preserving Historic Signs in the Commercial Landscape," 31). Tigard offered some leeway, but not much, when it regulated that if more than 50% of what it would cost to replace the sign was spent on altering the sign, it was required to conform to current codes, the effect being that major repairs to non-conforming signs were impossible (ibid.). These are just some of the many excellent examples Kramer's paper provides.

<sup>80</sup> Anthony DeFeo, "After 20-Year Delay, DeLand Cracks Down on Signs," *West Volusia Beacon*, December 11, 2019, [www.beacononlinenews.com/news/after--year-delay-deland-cracks-down-on-signs/article\\_652f97ee-1c69-11ea-98c0-7f4045738881.html](http://www.beacononlinenews.com/news/after--year-delay-deland-cracks-down-on-signs/article_652f97ee-1c69-11ea-98c0-7f4045738881.html) (accessed January 8, 2020).

merits rather than their historic value.”<sup>81</sup> Many of the movement’s biggest successes – Main Streets, preservation commissions, and historic districts – were culpable in the loss of neon signage.

The Main Street program was developed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the 1970s as an economic development alternative to destructive urban renewal programs that had swept the nation. It continues to be a successful strategy for revitalizing old places without tearing down buildings. It has not always been so friendly to old signs, however. In 1978, *Main Street: Building Improvement File* was published to show how Main Streets could be improved based on the strength of their historic fabric. The guide, which continued to be produced until 1995, used illustrations to show a clear preference for small signs on fascia boards, indicating that projecting signs (which were often neon) were too large and modern-looking to be appropriate. Treu pulls no punches in describing the effect of this false historicist approach:

*many older commercial thoroughfares...have been scrubbed down to their original nineteenth-century veneers, unsullied by history, shining as if just built. The historic buildings are often impeccably restored...But the dense variety of commercial signs...that had accumulated in the streetscapes over many years, showcasing the creativity and ambition of craftspeople and proprietors, has been stripped away. Layers of history have been purged...Most of these restored and rehabilitated traditional centers have a look that is unprecedented. History was never this tidy.*<sup>82</sup>

Local preservation commissions and historic districts have also tended to bias a sanitized version of building history. Traditional preservation practice is built around the concept of “periods of significance,” the idea that a place is important relative to a specific time period. Significant time periods can be many, but they generally must be more than 50 years old and they very rarely include the entire period from build date to the 50-year mark. The result is that potentially entire eras of a building’s history are considered insignificant and their erasure actually seen as a service to the work of historic preservation. Thus, areas where preservation controls have been enacted – whether through local review commissions, designated districts, or otherwise – often openly discourage or advocate for the elimination of intervening later additions from outside of the period of significance. Unfortunately, neon signs, which

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81 Treu, *Signs, Streets, and Storefronts*, 263.

82 Ibid., 6-7.

did not become 50 years old in this country until the 1970s, have too often been victims of preservation's scrubbing efforts.<sup>83</sup>

### ***III. The Comeback? (1980s-today)***

The observer of the dark, crumbling neon signage of the early 1980s would be forgiven for thinking neon's days were numbered. The tides seemed to have turned and the world moved on. Tube bender Paul Greenstein noted that when he started making neon signs in the 1970s, the supply houses thought he was crazy. Nobody started a career in neon these days, they said. Suppliers themselves were going bankrupt, making materials difficult to come by.<sup>84</sup> Reports of the death of neon are as old as neon itself, however. If casual observers had given up the ghost, the creative and visionary minds of the artist and architect were only just discovering the possibilities these old glowing tubes offered. It is these two fields – art and architecture, not preservation or planning – that deserve much of the credit for the resurgence of neon that continues today.<sup>85</sup>

Artists began discovering and working in neon in the 1970s, using the technology not for explicit commercial purposes but as a tool equal to the paintbrush or chisel for the creation of fine art. Neon art was exhibited in galleries across the country, including the country's first neon museum, the Museum of Neon Art in Los Angeles, which opened in 1981. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, through their seminal 1977 book *Learning from Las Vegas*, helped usher in a dramatic, playful new architectural style that re-embraced historic forms and "low-culture" influences in architecture. Postmodernism, as the style became known, embraced neon, sometimes in sign form but also as an element of the architecture itself, utilizing long and straight or gently curving tubes as dramatic accent elements. "Restored and steam-cleaned, the Downtowns of America now welcomed the restrained and somewhat measured excitement of tastefully designed and neatly installed window signs. A touch here and there – maybe in a cove, perhaps behind glass brick, or perhaps mounted to a newly scrubbed and lacquered brick wall."<sup>86</sup> (Figure 17).

If Postmodern art and architecture staved off the demise of neon in American cities in the 1980s, and nostalgia-seekers sustained it through the following decades, its current revival is thanks largely to Millennials. While Paul Simon sang 50 years earlier about praying to a neon god as a condemnation, pop

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83 Auer, *The Preservation of Historic Signs*; Kramer, "Preserving Historic Signs in the Commercial Landscape." Kramer points to Annapolis, MD, as a prime example (43).

84 Greenstein, *PreserveCast* interview with Nick Redding.

85 Auer, *The Preservation of Historic Signs*; Ribbat, *Flickering Light*.

86 Stern, *The New Let There Be Neon*, x.

stars of the 2010s have a different take. Award winning pop star Demi Lovato sings of the passion neon inspires in her 2013 Platinum hit “Neon Lights:” “Baby when they look up at the sky / We’ll be shooting stars just passing by / You’ll be coming home with me tonight / And we’ll be burning up like neon lights.” The Millennial generation and its Generation Z successors strongly value authenticity. While critics railed against neon when it was introduced as being the definition of inauthenticity, its handcrafted nature, prominence in beloved local businesses, and association with a seemingly more “real” past now make it a symbol of the authentic. Neon cannot be mass produced, and this craft element is perfectly in line with modern aesthetics.<sup>87</sup> As young adults move back into cities in droves and turn their backs on their parent’s corporate culture, traditional symbols of local urban businesses like neon are perfectly positioned to appeal.<sup>88</sup> There is even an ongoing podcast devoted specifically to neon signs and art with the retro-inspired name Mondo Neon.

Denver sign company manager Tina Weseloh says neon is a modern social media phenomenon and is seeing a surge of requests for it. She explains, “Retro is in right now, and a lot of people see neon as retro. Also, people are looking for something different than the average — and in my opinion, boring — LED channel letter sign. You just can’t get the feel of real neon any other way.”<sup>89</sup> Much of this neon is now indoors and text based, meant not as architectural element or to get drivers to pull over but to add to the experience that makes a place special (and Instagramable).<sup>90</sup> (Figure 18)

Corporations, generally unpopular with Millennials and Zoomers seeking locally-made goods, are even leaning on neon once again to connote authenticity and luxury in a way they have not embraced since the birth of the medium.<sup>91</sup> In 2016, fashion house Coach had a local New York company create a 6-foot pink neon T-rex for its SoHo store that is now on shirts, phone cases, and a \$145 bag charm. Jewelers Tiffany & Co. hung a neon sign in their 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue store window, and upscale department store Bergdorf Goodman, Italian fashion house Fendi, and others have embraced neon again as well.<sup>92</sup>

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87 Archer, “A Brief History of Neon Signage in Cities.”

88 Rinaldi, *New York Neon*.

89 Lindsay Frankel, “Neon Is Making a Comeback in Denver,” Our Community Now website, December 21, 2018, <https://ourcommunitynow.com/lifestyle/neon-is-making-a-comeback-in-denver> (accessed January 8, 2020).

90 The owner of the Denver restaurant Call claims it is a rite of passage for visitors to the restaurant to take a photo and Instagram their neon bathroom sign reading, “For a good time...” (ibid.).

91 A definitive name for members of Generation Z has not been universally agreed upon at the time of this writing, but Zoomer appears to be gaining traction.

92 Jennifer Miller, “In New York and Elsewhere, Neon Enjoying a Comeback,” *Columbus Dispatch*, October 21, 2017, [www.dispatch.com/entertainmentlife/20171021/in-new-york-and-elsewhere-neon-enjoying-comeback](http://www.dispatch.com/entertainmentlife/20171021/in-new-york-and-elsewhere-neon-enjoying-comeback) (accessed January 8, 2020).

In another turnaround, neon has begun to be seen as a tool for economic revitalization. There is a new appreciation for the historic value of signs, with communities and businesses owners no longer as quick to discard their signs as they once were.<sup>93</sup> In New York City, the sanitization of Times Square in the 1980s, while ultimately successful, was met by a vocal outcry. The city's Municipal Art Society fought vociferously against electric signs in the early 1920s but by the 1980s was fighting to keep them; their efforts eventually led to zoning changes requiring the same bright signage they had once sought to eliminate. Signs also began to gain recognition as historically valuable in and of themselves. In the New York area, the neon Jersey City Colgate sign and clock was retained even though the factory it advertised closed 30 years ago. Similarly, when redeveloping a large parcel in Long Island City, developers chose to keep a large illuminated Pepsi-Cola spectacular and make it the apartment development's waterfront highlight.<sup>94</sup> The story is repeated elsewhere, including Oklahoma City where officials encouraged neon as a way to revitalize an old stretch of road called Automobile Alley and help heal the city after years of economic decline and a scarring terrorist bombing. The result has been 29 neon signs in a six-block stretch.<sup>95</sup>

The preservation movement has also redeemed itself, led by the writing of Chester Liebs, the work of the Society for Commercial Archeology, and new recognition of the value of old signs. Neon remained a vital element of the streetscape in Las Vegas longer than in most of the country, and the city was a pioneer in its preservation as well. Recognizing the importance of their rich neon sign history as a critical character-defining element of the cityscape, sign preservation efforts began in the 1970s when the local Preservation Association of Clark County rescued the Thunderbird Hotel sign (but had nowhere to place it). A 1976 historic resources survey identified neon as an important feature of the local landscape and argued for it to be appreciated, recorded, encouraged, and even collected for posterity. By the 1980s the local Allied Arts Council began actively saving neon signs as well, partnering with the city in the founding of what became the Neon Museum (now a nonprofit). Understanding the importance of neon, the city donated the land to house the signs of the "neon boneyard" and museum.<sup>96</sup>

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93 Swan and Laufer, *Neon Nevada*.

94 Rinaldi, *New York Neon*.

95 Miller, "In New York and Elsewhere, Neon Enjoying a Comeback."

96 Johnson, *Spectacular*; Jennifer Joy Elacio Cagasan, "A Methodology for Preserving Las Vegas Neon Electric Displays" (master's thesis, Columbia University, 2012). The city's sign efforts have continued to expand. Cagasan's 2012 thesis reports that the city had begun to designate *in situ* signs as well, if they were at least 30 years old and in their original location. Designation provided the opportunity for a review board to make recommendations on changes to designated signs but did not

Sign codes and design guidelines have also slowly become friendlier to neon. In 1986 the Oklahoma Sign Design Guidelines became one of the first in the nation to recognize the importance of signs and explicitly discourage their removal under the guise of beautification. Even farther east, in cities less commonly associated with neon (but that were once as chock full of it as anywhere), change has been seen. Staunton, Virginia, for example, banned projecting signs in 1972 before reversing their decision in 2002.<sup>97</sup>

Critically, the nation's foremost arbiter of preservation practice, the NPS, added a strong voice of support for historic signs in 1991's Preservation Brief 25 "The Preservation of Historic Signs." Simply acknowledging that signs could have historic value was a big step forward. Preservation briefs set national standards for how to do the work of preservation properly, and NPS was bold and forward-thinking in its testimony against overly restrictive sign codes and design guidelines:

*In any case, tastes change. What is tasteful today may be dated tomorrow. Sign controls can impose a uniformity that falsifies history. Most historic districts contain buildings constructed over a long period of time, by different owners for different purposes; the buildings reflect different architectural styles and personal tastes. By requiring a standard sign "image" in such matters as size, material, typeface and other qualities, sign controls can mute the diversity of historic districts. Such controls can also sacrifice signs of some age and distinction that have not yet come back into fashion. Neon serves as an instructive example in this regard: once "in," then "out," then "in" again. Unfortunately, a great number of notable signs were lost because sign controls were drafted in many communities when neon was "out." Increasingly, however, communities are enacting ordinances that recognize older and historic signs and permit them to be kept. The National Park Service encourages this trend...Many efforts to control signage lead to bland sameness. For this reason the National Park Service discourages the adoption of local guidelines that are too restrictive, and that effectively dictate uniform signs within commercial districts.*<sup>98</sup>

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provide any regulatory authority to prevent changes or demolition. It should be noted that Las Vegas is equally well-known for its regular revamps and continued fixation on the new, especially along the Strip. This row of enormous casino hotels, however, is actually in unincorporated Clark County and not under city jurisdiction.

<sup>97</sup> Treu, *Signs, Streets, and Storefronts*.

<sup>98</sup> Auer, *The Preservation of Historic Signs*.



While an update to this nearly 30-year-old guiding document to address new technologies like LED would be welcome, Preservation Brief 25 should still remain a vital tool in the toolkit of any preservationist, historic commission member, and city planner. From exciting new technology to symbol of vice, from being regulated to the brink of extinction to being recognized as a valuable historic artifact neon signage has remained a key cultural touchstone since its introduction a century ago.

## **B. Portland Context**

### ***I. Portland's Neon History***

Portland, Oregon, was not divorced from the factors affecting neon nationwide, and it embraced the technology early on as a way to present to the world as a modern and vibrant city. Prior to neon, the city had embraced incandescents, especially on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, the “Great Light Way.” Large, illuminated crossed arches rose over every intersection from Glisan to Yamhill and remained in part from 1914 until 1940 (Figure 19).<sup>99</sup> The first mention of neon in the local paper of record, *The Oregonian*, is on October 3, 1927, when an ad for Griffin’s Cafeteria – on Broadway – boldly asked readers to, “LOOK FOR OUR NEW NEON SIGN.”<sup>100</sup> Signs continued to be mentioned in such fashion over the next decade with gleaming movie palace marquees rising on Broadway and smaller neon signs popping up along streetcar lines throughout the city’s east side. By 1942, a uniform sign code had been established, replacing and combining 10 earlier codes. Thirty-seven pages regulated signs in a way that was generally friendly to neon. Projecting signs that could illuminate were required to be illuminated from dusk until 10:00pm (11:00 downtown).<sup>101</sup> Rather than limiting the size of illumination, it required *minimum* standards, stating, “the portion of sign surface occupied by the illuminated letters or characters shall be not less than 30 percent of the total sign surface.”<sup>102</sup>

By the 1950s, the signage debates raging nationwide were also happening locally. The transcript from a 1957 public hearing on an ordinance prohibiting erection of certain signs within 100 feet of any approach to a bridge across the Willamette River provides an interesting case study. Jack E. Schnaidt of sign company Foster & Kleiser Co. notes the irony of a viewshed-based ban on signs when a 20-story building could be erected in the same spot. He continues poking holes in the proposal: “Again the stigma

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99 Dan Haneckow, “Great Light Way (3rd St., Portland),” Oregon Encyclopedia website, November 5, 2018, [https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/great\\_light\\_way\\_3rd\\_st\\_portland\\_/#.XiUQlkVKjj](https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/great_light_way_3rd_st_portland_/#.XiUQlkVKjj) (accessed January 20, 2020).

100 “Griffin’s Cafeteria,” *Portland Oregonian*, October 3, 1927: 2.

101 While this requirement encouraged lighted signs and their upkeep it also effectively made unused signs illegal.

102 City of Portland Archives, Sign Code, Ordinance 76571, January 15, 1942.

of traffic safety has been introduced as a means to invoke the police power. Nearly every recognized authority on traffic safety, including the National Safety Council, insurance companies, police associations, bar associations and local traffic safety councils praise rather than condemn outdoor advertisings. Studies conducted at Iowa State College, the Michigan State Highway Department and Harvard Medical School prove that outdoor advertising, rather than being a hazard, is actually a stimulant to the driver and is a favorable use of land adjacent to travelled roadways.” Citizen Miner Patter sums up the opposing view, speaking of a time before signage appeared near the bridges: “What a thrill and what a great deal of pleasure I got as I was up above the street and the surrounding houses, and could get a good view across the river at the City lying against the hills.” When later signs blocked this view he expressed a, “feeling of revulsion, a feeling of anger, that here was an approach to the City that could be beautiful, that could please the thousands of people that come across the Hawthorne Bridge, and now something was being done to tear that down.” Tellingly, Robert Fritsch of the Oregon Chapter of the American Institute of Architects shows a marked bias toward buildings, sharing his views that buildings are inherently beautiful, but signs are not. The debate continues in this way with dozens of testimonies over two hours, with sign companies and property owners largely alone in their defense of signage. The ban passed unanimously.<sup>103</sup>

The 1960s brought with it an all-out war on neon. A 1961 *Oregonian* editorial by Yustin Wallrapp of the Canvas Products Association of St. Paul (MN) lambasted neon signs while simultaneously praising the virtues of the canvas products she was paid to promote (with more than a little condescension and pretention):

*One sincerely wonders how your Council gets on with the really important matters of city planning if it is still considering the beauties of neon signs ....About the only place where electric signs are considered edifying is Coney Island. Maybe the strip joints in Baltimore and New Orleans share its ecstatic appreciations ...One only wishes that the electric boys were as bright as their signs...Let's limit the tawdry in the interest of taste and fashion...Tell the boys in the back room at the Council that the issue has already been decided by the rest of the world. Awnings won several centuries ago. Didn't taste get that far west?*

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103 City of Portland Archives, Ordinances to Sign Code, A2011-018, 1984. How the sign that now serves as the symbol of the city, the White Stag (which falls well within 100 feet of the Burnside Bridge), survived this ordinance is unclear.

Later, a January 8, 1962 letter from the Portland Art Commission to the mayor proclaims, “It is obvious to anyone walking in nearly any of the shopping areas that the conflict of signs protruding into the sidewalk area creates an unattractive and confusing picture.” The group writes with copious snark against the sign industry for not recognizing the “enhancement of appearances which would result” from the elimination of old signs and provides the mayor with photographic examples of the “objectionable character of much of Portland’s singning” in an attempt to influence stricter controls.<sup>104</sup> *The Oregonian* summarizes the views of the day: “Some persons don’t like neon signs, period...Most persons are not that touchy, however. They take neon signs in stride, along with television, freeways and other gear of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. There’s no disagreement, though, about unused signs whose tubes extend lifeless from the sides of vacant buildings. Everybody dislikes them. Such a sign is as great an eyesore as an abandoned, battered hulk of an automobile.”<sup>105</sup> (Figure 20)

It was in response to these kinds of criticisms that the sign industry began to respond. A 1965 memo from W.W. Marsh & Associates, public relations firm for Oregon’s Electric Advertising Institute, to member companies argued that neon signs when properly maintained present few issues. It nonetheless advocated for the removal of old, non-conforming signs that create the image of neon blight in the public mind. The firm advises aligning the sign industry with the growing beautification movement and talking about signage as graphic arts rather than advertising. It further proposes a model sign code (very similar to what was actually enacted around the country) that would remove all old signs within 10 years, mandate that relocated or replaced signs be complaint with current code, and ban flashing elements.<sup>106</sup>

Taking the advice to heart, the Oregon sign industry saw an opportunity to improve PR and business at the same time and launched its WASP program to eliminate old signs even before the campaign went national in the form of Scrap Old Signs. Secretary of State Tom McCall (well-known today as a champion of Oregon environmentalism) endorsed the program, calling the “unsightly electric signs” scenic pollution and likening efforts to remove them to the fight against water or air pollution.<sup>107</sup> Reporting on the February 1966 event, *The Oregonian* notes the “new glow” the state took on following a weekend spectacle of sign removal. Twenty-five sign companies (including 11 in Portland) across 12

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104 City of Portland Archives, Sign Code, A2001-015, 1967.

105 “Self Improvement,” *Portland Oregonian*, February 26, 1966: 14.

106 City of Portland Archives, Sign Code, A2011-018, Background Information, 1965.

107 “McCall Battles Unsightly Signs,” *Portland Oregonian*, October 19, 1965: 9.

cities removed 100 signs statewide for free that fateful weekend. Fifty of these signs were in Portland, including a smaller White Stag sign protruding over the sidewalk near the Burnside Bridge. Parroting the language of the beautification movement, Connie Davis of Portland's Ramsay Signs and chair of the state WASP program said, "We feel these old and dilapidated signs which are no longer in use are eyesores and are polluting Oregon's scenic beauty. Even though existing ordinances call for their removal by the owner, the association will have to do the work if it is to be done." Their historic value was not part of the conversation. While important markers for the community, the signs "were long-familiar but no longer needed."<sup>108</sup> The program was so successful that WASP became a standing offer by local sign companies to "improve the appearance of the street" by removing any sign an owner would allow them access to.<sup>109</sup>

The City continued to tweak its sign code as well. Some of the rationale for regulating signage comes through in documents from the City Archives. A 1968 document asks, "In the formulation of a public policy regarding on-premise advertising signs, which of the following public and private interests should be protected or promoted by the policy?" Choices include controlling competition among information sources for motorists' attention, reducing information overload on motorists, eliminating or reducing invasions of privacy by advertising signs, enhancing the overall appearance of roadside development or street scenes, and others. All generally fall into the categories of safety, appearance, and relationship of signs to other land uses.<sup>110</sup> Discussion surrounding outdoor advertising (billboards) the following year – while not specific to neon signs – shows a clear bias against old signage in general.<sup>111</sup> Though following federal precedent, by proposing that signs must be removed within a set timeframe (rather than fixed or vested), policy makers disregarded the possibility of signage serving as historical artifact and purposely sought to eliminate the past. The sign ordinance amendments that passed that year differed in many ways from the 1942 version, particularly in their focus on interior illuminated translucent plastic signs.<sup>112</sup>

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108 "Advertising Group Opens Campaign to Remove Obsolete, Unkempt Signs," *Portland Oregonian*, February 21, 1966: 20.

The article also includes a photo opportunity showing the general exuberance of the event: the administrative assistant to the mayor of Portland "being swung on a boatswain's chair at the end of a 60-foot crane boom."

109 "Self Improvement," 14. It is unclear how long this offer stood for. Today, sign companies still regularly take old signs down for property owners, though now usually in an effort to save them from destruction rather than for the purpose of destroying them.

110 City of Portland Archives, Sign Regulation Maps Key, A2011-018, 1968. It is curious that it appears possible given this information that the City decided *to* enact regulations before determining *why* it was enacting them.

111 City of Portland Archives, Sign Proposals, A2011-018, 1969.

112 City of Portland Archives, Sign Code: Amended to 1969, Record Series 2200-02, February 24, 1969.

Nevertheless, Portland did show leadership and foresight in some of its later sign policies. In 1983, earlier than many cities, Portland introduced sign control by district, recognizing for the first time in Oregon that at least in certain areas (downtown's Broadway in this case) signs contributed to rather than detracted from local character. Within this "bright lights district" neon was preferred rather than discouraged. Such freedom allowed the enormous illuminated Paramount Theater blade sign to be rebuilt in its historic "Portland" form but unfortunately did nothing to protect the equally brilliant theater neon on the Broadway and Fox Theaters, both of which disappeared when their buildings were demolished in ensuing years. While the encouragement of neon was an important change of heart, it did not account for rising land values where traditional neon-friendly uses like entertainment were simply less profitable ventures for developers than skyscraper office buildings. In other words, the district offered allowances but not the incentives or protections necessary to be more than nominally successful in preserving signs.<sup>113</sup>

Local artist Gayle Young, working in the medium of neon, expressed her frustration with the city's continued regulation of neon in a letter to mayor Bud Clark dated March 28, 1989: "As a neon artist it is difficult to supply the great demand for innovative neon sculptures and wall units when the City will not allow its existence....It is sad that a city which prides itself in the love and support of the Arts would so heartily deny the newest form of artistic expression while other cities throughout the State as well as the rest of the nation embrace this neon art as a signature of this era...It is disheartening that inspectors which do not understand this technology are able to stamp out an art form because of their personal dislike." The July 7, 1989 response from Commissioner Mike Lindberg calls upon "public safety" as the rationale for the codes that made it challenging for Ms. Young to find a place to display her artwork.<sup>114</sup>

In recent years, the tides of public opinion have very much turned once again in favor of neon and former foes have become allies. The Portland Development Commission, the organization that presided over the city's urban renewal and concurrent elimination of countless historic signs in the mid-twentieth century, began providing grants that could be used to preserve neon by the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>115</sup> Architects, who railed against signs for sullyng their buildings in the mid-century, also became advocates. This was the case for architect Stuart Emmons, who was part of an ultimately failed effort to save Interstate Avenue's Crown Motel sign from being displaced by a large new affordable

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113 Kramer, "Preserving Historic Signs in the Commercial Landscape."

114 City of Portland Archives, Metropolitan Arts Commission, A2000-001, 1989.

115 For more on this program, see Chapter 4.

housing block. The property's new owners could not be convinced to retain the sign on site, however. While the City created allowances for it to be moved, allowances yet again proved insufficient, and ultimately a new site could not be located. Jeff Joslin, former city planner and liaison to the city Design Commission (another group formerly antagonistic to neon signs), summed up the issue: "Those of us who love and appreciate those signs, who have imagined the possibility of them being designated individually or collectively as landmarks and potentially afforded some degree of protection, know that we would need owner consent and desire...I'm not aware of any organized effort to do that."<sup>116</sup> It is part of the intention of my project to encourage an organized effort to "do that."

Portland has tracked along with the rest of the country in its relationship to its neon signs. Neon was embraced, disregarded, and brought back from the brink in Bridgetown just as it was elsewhere. While the City has shown initiative in recent decades in recognizing the potential significance of historic neon signs, countless treasures have still been lost. Of the signs mentioned in the *Oregonian* article, "19 iconic Portland signs that disappeared, but are far from forgotten," nine contained neon. Three have been altered with new neon (not necessarily a bad outcome), three were altered without neon, one was removed, and two were lost when their buildings were demolished.<sup>117</sup> Portland today has nowhere near the volume of neon it once had, but it still has quite a bit.

## ***II. Portland Neon Today***

Neon signs, old and new, are abundant in Portland, from downtown to neighborhood centers and beyond. This section examines the geographic distribution of signs across the city and the state of the sign industry followed by short profiles of four representative neon signs: the White Stag, Portland Outdoor Store, Laurelhurst Theater, and The Whole 9 Yards.

### ***a. Geographic Distribution***

Portland is truly a neon city. Rather than being limited strictly to a few single downtown or arterial streets, neon signs – new and old – abound throughout Portland. While there are certainly clusters of signs in these common locations, neon is present to some extent in virtually every commercial area of the city. Portland is incredibly fortunate in this regard, the result being a city that is defined by neon signs as a part of city culture rather than being relegated just to certain neighborhoods. Moreover, Portland has

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<sup>116</sup> James Mayer, "Is It Lights Out for Signs of the Past?" *Portland Oregonian*, December 28, 2007.

<sup>117</sup> Grant Butler, "19 Iconic Portland Signs That Disappeared, but Are Far from Forgotten," *Portland Oregonian*, [www.oregonlive.com/news/g66l-2019/02/49d8af184a2101/19-iconic-portland-signs-that-disappeared-but-are-far-from-forgotten.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/news/g66l-2019/02/49d8af184a2101/19-iconic-portland-signs-that-disappeared-but-are-far-from-forgotten.html) (accessed January 8, 2020).

done relatively well by national standards in retaining its vintage signs. Debra Jane Seltzer reports that Portland lost 9% of its vintage signs between 2000-2018. While this is 9% too many, it is better than most. Only Los Angeles, Denver, Omaha, San Diego, Tucson, and San Francisco have lost a lower percentage of their vintage signs.<sup>118</sup> Notably, 2/3 of these better-performing cities have dedicated neon preservation programs of some kind. Portland's success despite having very little in the way of explicit, coordinated neon sign protection is fortunate, but as development pressure continues to increase it is only a matter of time before that pressure catches up to the city's vast collection of vintage neon. The city's neon sign blessing comes with a responsibility to protect this cache of signs that form an important character-defining feature of the Portland landscape.

Figure 21 show the geographic distribution of neon in Portland. Because neon signs are so prevalent in the city, a searchable map is needed to truly grasp their density; further detail can be seen at <https://bit.ly/2WtYV6G>. This map is limited to noting location rather than including photographs and architectural descriptions and thus is not a complete Reconnaissance Level Survey. Neither does it represent a thorough visual inspection of every commercial street in the city. It does, however, give a good indication of where neon signs can be found throughout the city. Excluded from the map are interior neon signs visible from the street, signs that include neon solely as an outline traced around a sign, neon-like LED signs, and ubiquitous corporate neon signs.<sup>119</sup> The map does, however, include recent neon signs, and does not attempt to distinguish between newer and older signs. While this is not an attempt to say every neon sign is worthy of preservation, this decision was made to provide as complete a picture as possible of the scope of neon in Portland. The map includes the following: every sign that meets the above criteria and is listed on the RoadsideArchitecture.com website of national sign cataloger Debra Jane Seltzer; signs noted on the Portland Neon map of local neon expert and neon walking tour guide Kate Widdows' Electric Letterland project; and signs noted on the @portlandneon Instagram account. It is supplemented by the personal observations of myself and my wife, Rachel Ebersole, based on our travels throughout Portland from August 2018 to May 2020. All signs were verified visually.

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118 Debra Jane Seltzer, "Where Are We? And Where Do We Go from Here?" (presentation), Neon Speaks Symposium, San Francisco, April 21, 2018.

119 This excludes, for example, neon signs on Burgerville fast food restaurants and Washman car washes, which exist throughout the metro region and almost all feature neon in some capacity. It does include, however, signs like the Pearl District's Whole Foods Market neon sign, as this sign is a distinctive interpretation of the company's logo unique to its location. The fact that there are regional companies that rely heavily on neon is testament to the embeddedness of neon in Portland culture, as is the willingness of national corporations to alter their branding to fit in with the surrounding environment, but the decision to exclude ubiquitous signs is an attempt to focus on unique signs.

While signs are spread throughout the city, significant strips exist along traditional commercial corridors including N. Interstate Ave., N. Lombard St., NE Broadway St., NE Sandy Blvd., E. Burnside St., SE Hawthorne Blvd., SE Division St., and SE Powell Blvd., as well as clustered in the Westmoreland, Brooklyn, Central Eastside, Belmont, and St. Johns streetcar suburb commercial centers. The highest concentration of signs exists in the Old Town/Chinatown, Skidmore, and downtown neighborhoods bounded roughly by NW Glisan St. to the north, I405 to the west, SW Main St. to the south, and the Willamette River to the east. Signs with potential historic significance do exist in isolation however, including prominent rooftop signs for Montgomery Park and Jim Fisher Volvo; freestanding signs for the Capitol Hill Motel and Burlingame Fred Meyer on SW Barbur Blvd., Ron Tonkin Chevrolet on SE 122<sup>nd</sup> Ave., the Sixth Ave. Motel on SW 6<sup>th</sup> Ave., the Jantzen Beach Denny's, and Powell Villa; the fascia sign at Union Station on NW 6<sup>th</sup> Ave.; multiple historic theater marquees; and others. Taken together, this map shows a city abundant with neon that defines the character of Portland.

What is missing, however, is equally notable. Historic photos of Portland's streetscape compared with photos taken from the same locations today show a city that has lost an untold number of cultural treasures. From the former cluster of elaborate neon spectacles at Burnside and Sandy to the brightly lit row of marquees and blade signs along SE Broadway and beyond, today's Portland looks noticeably dark compared to its former glow. (Figures 22-25) The stories of some of these losses show that the current state of affairs is simply insufficient to adequately protect old neon signs in the city, as valuable cultural resources continue to be lost regularly.

Wentworth Chevytown featured a large neon sign that sat high on three poles on the car dealership's Central Eastside lot for decades before being removed in 2013. Visible from across the Willamette River downtown, the sign was a city icon, but it faced a high voltage power line, and occupational safety regulations did not allow for any way to maintain or repair the sign. In the face of the owner's inability to maintain or repair the sign for over 20 years, its condition slowly deteriorated. The company even asked if the power lines could be moved across the street so they could maintain their sign, but the new streetcar line on SE MLK Blvd. prevented that from being an option. "We tried everything to save that sign," Wentworth said when it came down. "It's a sad day. The last thing we wanted to do was take down that sign, but we had no option."<sup>120</sup> The business was sold in 2018. The Wentworth story

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120 Elliot Njus, "'Wentworth Chevytown' Sign on Portland's East Side Coming Down," *Portland Oregonian*, November 25, 2013, [www.oregonlive.com/portland/2013/11/wentworth\\_chevytown\\_sign\\_comin.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/2013/11/wentworth_chevytown_sign_comin.html) (accessed January 8, 2020).



shows that even a dedicated owner who values their neon sign is sometimes not enough to preserve a cultural icon in the face of unbending regulations. (Figure 26)

Some signs are able to be saved but have nowhere to go once they come down. Such was the case with the Chinese Village sign on SE 82<sup>nd</sup> Ave. It was luck that Portland neon expert Kate Widdows and Neon Gods sign restorationist Michael Mintz happened to notice the sign's building was being demolished in 2018. They were able to convince the demolition company to let them take it away for free rather than destroying it, and a local collector offered to help with its removal and store it temporarily. The team reached out to museums, sign companies, nonprofits, and local government, and eventually a sign company emerged that was willing to keep the sign temporarily while the team worked to find it a new home. Ultimately, according to the collector, the sign was sold to a Texas collector for eventual inclusion in an outdoor museum.<sup>121</sup> Aside from the fact that this sign would have been destroyed were it not for the good fortune and tenacity of dedicated activists, this story illustrates the precarious situation of much of Portland's neon, which could be here today and gone tomorrow, and the difficulties that can arise even with dedicated advocates working hard to find a solution.

A final example demonstrates that even developers who want to include neon in their community-centered adaptive reuse projects can feel stymied by codes and costs perceived as restrictive. The former Original Taco House restaurant was part of a strip mall complex at SE Powell and 35th that is being redeveloped into a center for restaurants, retail, and food carts and envisioned as a living room for the Creston-Kenilworth neighborhood. The area offers no other central commercial hub, and the developer is working with the local neighborhood association to ensure that the center meets the community's needs. In June 2019, company spokesman Mark New mentioned they were "currently working on a name for the project, which will depend on whether the City of Portland lets us use some of the historic signage." The Development Company of the West, who is spearheading the project, praised the historic Original Taco House sign, which remained from a transition period in the history of signage that employed both plastic and neon, and sought to build their development around it.<sup>122</sup>

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121 Barna and Homan, *Saving Neon*; Kate Widdows, email to the author, February 21, 2020; Ed Long, conversation with the author, February 27, 2020.

122 Rita A. Leonard, "New Mall Planned for Powell Boulevard at 35th," *Sellwood Bee*, June 7, 2019, <https://pamplinmedia.com/sb/75-features/430063-337473-new-mall-planned-for-powell-boulevard-at-35th-pwoff> (accessed January 17, 2020).

However, according to Michael Mintz of Neon Gods, who was in conversation with the developer about the sign, the idea to preserve the historic neon was discarded due to the perceived high cost of getting permission to reconfigure the sign. While the proposed sign would be in an area already heavy with signage and reuse much of the old sign while cutting its overall size in half, it was still larger than the cutoff triggering a need for an Adjustment review (one of Portland's terms for a variance to code requirements). While subjective review can be an important tool for preservation, in this case the time and cost of nearly \$4,000 just for the Adjustment review to earn the right to re-erect the sign with no guarantee that the request would be granted convinced the developer that it was ultimately not worth it. While a smaller fee could have been paid for an early assistance meeting to see if a variance could have been supported by City staff, the uncertainty of the process led the developer to opt for new plastic sign instead.<sup>123</sup> Tweaks to the process, including different rules about what is considered a "new" sign, incentives that streamline costs and time required if a project re-uses a historic sign, or other creative solutions might have avoided this loss.

*b. The Sign Industry*

Mintz is one of a handful of individuals and companies working on neon in Portland. Doing business as Neon Gods, he occupies a niche in the market maintaining and repairing historic neon signs in Portland, San Francisco, and throughout the Pacific Northwest. Mintz became interested in neon after working in historic theaters in San Francisco and learning the craft from a friend who serviced many of their marquees. He founded his own company in 1988 but work has rarely been enough to allow the neon restoration business to be a full-time job. Mintz maintains another part-time job to support his passion for neon signs. While he occasionally does some of the painting on sign cabinets, Mintz's primary work is in conservation. Partnering with others for the tube bending and to borrow a crane when needed, Neon Gods markets largely by word of mouth. Mintz has done major conservation work on a number of important local neon signs including the Palms Motel, Alibi, Laurelhurst and Aladdin Theaters, the old Music Box Theater marquee, and The Vern. He even personally mounted a GoFundMe campaign that raised almost \$2,000 to help pay for the restoration of the elaborate Chin's Kitchen sign in the city's Hollywood neighborhood, thus far the only time crowdfunding has been used to help save a neon sign in

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<sup>123</sup> Michael Mintz, conversation with author, January 17, 2020.

Portland (Figure 27).<sup>124</sup> Mintz's story is a testament to the incredible influence one individual can have on the neon landscape of a city but is also a stark reminder of the current state of affairs.

Most of the tube bending for the city's neon signs is done by a surprisingly small handful of individuals. Four companies in the area provide neon bending service, and each generally employs only one bender each: Tiny Spoon, Neon Distributors, Artico Lite, and Ramsay Signs (the city's oldest sign company). In the first version of his book, *Let There Be Neon*, neon artist Rudi Stern lamented, "at a time when some architects, lighting designers, graphic designers, and sculptors are becoming increasingly aware of neon's possibilities, there are few if any young people learning the craft of glass bending. Without this essential skill which takes many years to master, new receptivity to the medium's potentials will get nowhere." By the 1988 second version, he was more optimistic, noting an increase in practitioners and a rekindling of interest in passing the trade to future generations.<sup>125</sup> The aging of the current population of skilled benders and a lack of new blood to take up the work remains an issue, however. At least some of this can be attributed to demand. While there is certainly a demand for neon in Portland and around the country, even sign companies that specialized in neon in the past and still make and service neon today have begun to contract out the glass bending part of their work to a limited group of skilled benders because there isn't enough work to keep a full-time bender on staff.

One such company is Security Signs, one of Portland's largest and oldest local sign companies.<sup>126</sup> Now in their fourth building, Security created a number of Portland icons from the Waddles Drive-In (now Hooters) sign to the lost Franz Bakery fascia neon to the Burlingame Fred Meyer signs. Security's warehouse is filled with vintage neon they have rescued from the wild (they often offer to remove a sign for free when they know it is in danger). They also keep a mothballed neon workshop in the hope that the neon business returns to a point where a full-time in-house bender is possible again. Today, the company makes all different types of signs, but notes the rapid rise of LED. According to owner Kevin Keljo, before LED, neon was the only way to get custom shapes for letters and thus was often used as interior lighting after the rise of plastic. LED continues to fall in price, however, and cut into neon's previous market share. Some customers will come to them explicitly asking for neon, but many simply want a sign. In these cases, Security works with the client to create the sign that best meets their needs, often

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Stern, *The New Let There Be Neon*, vi.

<sup>126</sup> Other sign companies in the Portland metro area that work in neon are Clark Signs, Vancouver Sign Group, Tube Art, Advanced Electric, Garrett Sign, and Gas n' Glass.

including neon if the customer and local sign codes allow for it. The majority of neon coming out of the company today is as an accent rather than as a lettering and design focus.<sup>127</sup> (Figures 28-29)

Also, the role signs play for businesses has changed over the years. In the golden age of neon, signs essentially served as a business' logo. A sign company would design a custom neon sign for a local client that would serve as a primary form of advertising for the business. Today, however, chains and corporations often do not want any kind of customization; they just want their already-existing, computer-created logo to go on a sign that looks the same in Portland, Oregon as it does in Portland, Maine. This kind of rote computerized reproduction matches the mass-produced quality of LED more than the handmade aesthetic of neon. LED has also cut into full-service sign companies' neon business because it largely eliminates the need for maintenance contracts. Neon signs almost always come with an option for a maintenance contract, with the sign company regularly visiting the sign to ensure all is in working order. With this kind of maintenance, neon signs can last decades. LED signs, however, are not made to be maintained but replaced. Both these stories – of specialty neon restoration company Neon Gods and large generalist sign company Security Signs – paint a picture of the state of neon in Portland that is challenging. The city has a strong representation of new and vintage neon and a smattering of dedicated tube benders, but the reality from the supply side reminds us that market forces alone are not sufficient to ensure that neon remains a vital part of the landscape.

### *c. Neon Sign Profiles*

Portland's remaining neon signs come in all shapes and sizes. The following four profiles show the diversity of neon signs that exist in the city and represent the broad spectrum of significant historic neon sign resources present on city streets. Taken together they reveal vast differences in scale, integrity, and purpose amongst Portland's neon sign stock and show that neon is not just a medium for small bar signs or skyline-commanding spectaculars. They also remind us that these signs are ultimately more than advertising or art; they are the lifeblood of people's livelihood and anchors that have rooted neighborhoods for generations.

#### 1. White Stag

No study of Portland neon would be complete without recounting the storied saga of the city's most famous sign, that popular icon of the city that has been beaming down on the Burnside Bridge for

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<sup>127</sup> Kevin Keljo (owner, Security Signs), interview with the author, November 2019.

almost 80 years: the White Stag. Built in the 1940s by Ramsay Signs, the 50'x52' spectacular was the largest sign in the Pacific Northwest at the time of its construction. Shining down on the city from the top of a riverfront warehouse were 1,100 feet of neon tubing and 500 incandescent bulbs advertising White Satin Sugar and featuring an animated sack of sugar being poured into an outline of the state. No photos of this earliest incarnation are known to exist, but later alterations show the sugar sack gone and replaced with a large circular White Satin Sugar logo within the state outline. In 1957, the company operating in the building below the sign, White Stag Sportswear, the largest ski clothing manufacturer in the nation, decided it could benefit from advertising its own product on the sign and changed the sign's image to a stag jumping out of the northeastern corner of the state with the words "White Stag" and "Sportswear" in distinctive lettering below. The stag, letter style and placement, and oval base introduced at this time remain to this day. The sign was designated a city historic landmark in 1978, which preserved the state outline, stag, and lettering style as historic. In the late 1970s, when much of the nation had turned its back on neon, Portland had declared its iconic neon sign a historic landmark.<sup>128</sup>

A major controversy arose in 1997 when the wording was changed to "Made in" (replacing "White") "Oregon" (replacing Stag). The oval at the sign's base that had read "Sportswear" was also changed to "Old Town." All changes kept the lettering style of the White Stag Sportswear sign, however. A small addition was made in the form of the Ramsay Signs logo in neon at the very bottom of the sign. The White Stag Sportswear company had vacated the building, and the sign transitioned to a more general nod to local pride, but the change was still contentious among a population that saw the White Stag words themselves as historic. The change was allowed by the local Historic Landmarks Commission, who recognized that some change was necessary to ensure the future commercial viability of the property so long as certain character-defining elements of the sign remained. This precedent ultimately allowed for another transition in 2010.

The building underneath the sign had been largely vacant for years, but the University of Oregon signed a lease in 2006. The arrival of the university was seen as a boon for the struggling neighborhood, but the university expressed concerns about paying to light a large sign on their building that did not advertise their product. They proposed a change in 2008 that would change the main text of the sign from "Made in Oregon" to "University of Oregon." The sign was still owned by Ramsay, who advocated for

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128 Joseph Rose, "The Love Story behind the White Stag Sign's Glowing Red Nose," *Portland Oregonian*, January 9, 2019, [www.oregonlive.com/history/2015/12/white\\_stag\\_signss\\_red\\_nose\\_was.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/history/2015/12/white_stag_signss_red_nose_was.html) (accessed February 11, 2020).

allowing the change to occur. The city's first ruling on the matter the following year, however, was that the proposal contained too many letters and was inconsistent with the historic look. Mayor Sam Adams and Commissioners Randy Leonard and Nick Fish cosponsored an ordinance to seize the sign and preserve the current, more inclusive, wording. Because Oregon law does not allow regulation of signs based on content, the move would have used the city's power to condemn property to give them ownership and control over the wording. While the city would have been required to pay the market value of \$500,000 plus maintenance and lease of roof space for the deal, it also would have required the university to give up property on which they had a lease-purchase option. The university responded by threatening to let the sign go dark. Meanwhile, further opposition to the change arose from the other state university with a main campus just a few blocks away, Portland State, which opposed using such a prominent space to advertise for a school that had a limited relationship with the city. By April 2009, the University of Oregon, Ramsay, and the city agreed that the sign could read simply "Oregon" in university colors and the city would retain the first option to purchase the sign if the university ever left the building.<sup>129</sup> By September, however, the university's financial situation had changed and they decided not to renew their lease on the sign, leaving Ramsay with a large sign and a desire to sell.<sup>130</sup>

Once again launched into a state of uncertainty, the sign briefly went dark. The deal that finally saved the sign in 2010 allowed the words "Made in" to be changed to "Portland" and transferred ownership to the city. The document is 104 pages long and broke the printer at the city offices that was making copies for all the parties involved. At Leonard's urging, the city declared an emergency in September (the emergency being a need to get the sign lit by Thanksgiving so the decades-long annual tradition of lighting the stag's nose for the holidays could continue), allowing the deal to go through. Ultimately, Ramsay donated the sign to the city who agreed to pay \$2,000 per month to the sign company for maintenance. Art DeMuro of Venerable Properties, who owned the building, donated \$200,000 to change the lettering and arranged for revenue from a neighboring parking lot and commercial space that DeMuro leased from the city to pay the maintenance bill. In a 4-0 vote, the city approved the change,

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129 Longtime Landmarks Commission member Harris Matarazzo commented that the commission had never received as much mail on a case as they had for this sign (Fred Leeson, "Portland Landmarks Panel Allows Sign Tweak," *Portland Oregonian*, July 14, 2010).

130 The content in this paragraph is largely derived from J. Jason Smith, "The Made in Oregon Soap Opera," Graphicology website, October 9, 2009, [www.graphicology.com/blog/2009/10/9/272-the-made-in-oregon-soap-opera.html](http://www.graphicology.com/blog/2009/10/9/272-the-made-in-oregon-soap-opera.html) (accessed February 11, 2020.)

which, thanks to the unique arrangement, resulted in no new taxes and no money taken from the city budget.<sup>131</sup>

The long history of the White Stag sign illustrates the value of allowing changes to historic neon signs that retain the character of the original. It also shows the extreme lengths that can be necessary to preserve a cultural icon, but also that the battle is ultimately worth it. Today's White Stag sign image is *the* icon of the city, featured in the convention center, airport, and wherever Portland is presented to the general public. By taking ownership of the sign, the city also showed that it values its neon heritage and set a precedent that should allow for it to take an even more active role in preserving the many other neon treasures within its borders. (Figures 30-31)

## 2. Portland Outdoor Store

Just a few blocks from the White Stag sign is a reminder that despite all its coffee shops and food carts, Portland began life as the Wild West. The Portland Outdoor Store opened in 1914 and continues to sell an array of Western wear to residents and visitors. A main attraction for visitors to the store is outside on its corner. The store's enormous tapered blade neon sign features multiple lettering styles, graphics, and colors, making it one of the most elaborate in the city. It is thought to have been added around 1947, though the earliest images are from videos of the Rose Festival Parade in the 1950s. The sign, along with the business and building, has been owned since 1977 by Brad Popick, whose family has owned the business on and off since the 1930s. It was once the flagship location for a chain that included outposts in Gresham and Beaverton.

Popick says he has never considered not keeping his store's iconic neon sign, and he's even added smaller neon signs to the interior and put the image on t-shirts. He likes the warming effect of the neon glow (a feature lacking in newer LEDs) and says it is part of the genre and mystique of the American West. It's also a boon for business, as people stop in from all over the world just to see, draw, paint, and photograph the sign. Unlike many large neon signs of the era, the Portland Outdoor Store sign was in good shape even when Popick bought the business in the 1970s. It has continued to work well ever since. Occasionally tubes will need to be replaced because birds accidentally break them, but the sign has never given him any major problems in the 43 years he's owned it. The transformer, thought to

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<sup>131</sup> Tom Hallman, "City Owns 'Made in Oregon' Sign and Hopes to Have It Ready for Holiday Season," *Portland Oregonian*, September 15, 2010, [www.oregonlive.com/portland/2010/09/city\\_owns\\_made\\_in\\_oregon\\_sign.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/2010/09/city_owns_made_in_oregon_sign.html) (accessed February 11, 2020).

be original, did not need to be replaced until 2010. That the sign has lasted for almost 75 years with just routine maintenance by Ramsay is a testament to the longevity of the medium. It does have a patina of age, but Popick likes the look and has no desire to restore it, preferring to preserve it as is. People are drawn to neon signs no matter what shape they're in, he said. The roughly \$300 per month electric bill has never been a hardship and is just a part of doing business, but the store does save money by not running the sign much during the short summer nights when there just aren't as many hours of darkness.<sup>132</sup>

The story of the Portland Outdoor Store sign is a hopeful one, a story of a city icon that has advertised the same business for decades in the hands of an owner who fully appreciates it because it has stood the test of time and become as synonymous with the business as anything that is sold inside. Still, it has little in the way of official protection or recognition. The building is listed on the City's 1984 Historic Resource Inventory (HRI), which comes with a 120-day demolition delay but no power to stop the demolition. The listing also does not mention the sign. In addition, the sign's building is listed in the City's unreinforced masonry building (URM) database. As the City continues to develop policies surrounding URMs, some of which have been criticized for placing unmanageable financial burdens on small business owners, the future of many of Portland's old masonry buildings remains in question. Hopefully this will not become a case of a legacy business and its legendary neon sign being displaced because of well-intentioned life safety policies, but it does show that there are threats to historic neon signs even if they have international followings and committed owners. (Figure 32)

### 3. Laurelhurst Theater

Across the Willamette River, anchoring the city's popular NE 28<sup>th</sup> Street commercial corridor, is the Laurelhurst Theater. The Laurelhurst's soaring blade sign, scripted "L" symbols, and fanciful peacock plume of multicolored neon tubes cover virtually every inch of the art deco cinema's façade and represent the most extensive use of architectural neon in the city. The theater opened in 1923 with a more classical-style entrance on 28<sup>th</sup> Street, but the current façade on Burnside was not added until likely the 1940s, along with a small lunch counter. When current owner Woody Wheeler purchased the business and building in 2000, the neon "was in very bad shape. The metal on the underside was rusted all the way through in multiple locations. A lot of the neon didn't work and most to all of the paint was peeling."<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Brad Popick, conversation with the author, January 16, 2020.

<sup>133</sup> Woody Wheeler, emails to the author, January 8 and 16, 2020.



Wheeler has done significant work on the theater and its neon in the 20 years since but admits that the neon was not the first priority: “We didn’t have a lot of money when we started so it looked pretty bad. We focused on getting the interior comfortable, the mechanical working and the roof to stop leaking before we could get to the sign.”<sup>134</sup> He did get to the sign by 2007, however. “The upper section, with the vertical Laurelhurst, was completely removed...Upon commencement of work they realized they had to start completely over because there was no steel sub-structure, only sheet metal. Speculation was the upper section was built right around WWII when steel was in short supply.”<sup>135</sup> Since then, maintenance work was done by David Benko, founder of the National Neon Sign Museum, and more recently by Michael Mintz at Neon Gods.

The faithful re-creation of the original blade sign shows a dedication on Wheeler’s part to historical integrity, especially as it was not subject to any protections from the City. The building and its extravagant neon currently have no historic resource listing or formal protections of any kind, and its future is only as certain as the current owner’s faith in its value and willingness to continue to maintain it. “It’s an amazing sign but is in need of constant repair,” Wheeler notes.<sup>136</sup> The story of the Laurelhurst Theater is again a testament to a committed owner but reminds us that neon is a financial investment, especially for larger signs. The burdens of this cost are currently borne entirely by business owners, even though the benefits of the neon extend to the entire community. Without grants or other incentives, treasures like the Laurelhurst neon sign remain in a precarious position. (Figure 33)

#### 4. The Whole 9 Yards

The final sign is lesser-known but no less important. In fact, as Len Davidson says in *Vintage Neon*, smaller signs can even be more meaningful because of their personal scale. They’re not the city-defining spectacles but local landmarks that can feel like a comforting private neighborhood treasure. The Whole 9 Yards (W9Y) sign is one of these neighborhood treasures, made all the more special because of its fascinating history. W9Y opened in the Pearl District in 1991, but owners Jamie Eoff and Amy Estrin moved the fabric store across the Willamette River to a building they’d purchased on E Burnside in 2005. Their new home was the 1952 former Columbia Neon factory. The owners of Columbia Neon were retiring with no new benders to replace them, and another Portland neon company disappeared. Eoff and Estrin wanted to honor the history of their new building and take advantage of the

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134 Ibid.

135 Ibid.

136 Ibid.

visibility of their large neon sign. Such a sign may be difficult or impossible to build today because of current sign codes, but the sign on their building had legal status.

The old cursive “Columbia Neon” letters came down and were replaced with new “The Whole 9 Yards Fabric” text Eoff designed himself. One of the old letters was kept on display in the former neon factory turned fabric store. The process of changing the text on their vested sign did require a process with the city, but Eoff did not find it burdensome. In this case, it was really the prime location and history of the building that prompted Eoff to install his new neon letters in place of the old rather than replacing everything with backlit plastic as has happened with so many other former neon signs throughout the city. The expense was worth it though, he says. As was the case with much older neon, the store ended up taking its logo from the sign design, rather than the now more common practice of simply plastering existing logos onto a sign. Eoff has been happy with the sign, which he says helps draw people into the store.

Maintenance on the new neon, which was created by Vancouver Sign Company, has been minimal, even though the sign stays lit all the time. The sign has only needed one major cleaning in the 15 years it has been up. Occasionally the rain will cause some issues and knock a letter or two out, but they usually come back in a few days, and he likes the quirky character of having a letter or so out every now and then. While it’s not the city’s most elaborate sign, it does its job well. As Eoff says, it doesn’t matter how fancy it is, neon in and of itself is cool and has a special draw.<sup>137</sup> In the case of W9Y, the system worked well. The original lettering of the old Columbia Neon sign may be lost, but the new owners were able to make the sign work for their business needs, chose to continue the tradition of advertising in neon, and navigated the process successfully. While this is a positive outcome, there was nothing compelling the owners to act as they did, and this sign could just as easily have joined the ranks of other old neon sign boxes hollowed out and painted over. More encouragement in the form of regulations, incentives, and advocacy and outreach can help ensure that more new business owners who inherit classic neon signs follow in the footsteps of W9Y. (Figure 34)

Having explored the history of neon nationally and locally and why it rose, fell, and rose again in favor, we must dive deeper into the most important battle of all: the battle for hearts and minds. We have

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137 Jamie Eoff, telephone conversation with the author, January 15, 2020.

explored the what, when, and where of neon; now we must explore the why. Why is neon worth saving in the first place? Without this understanding and conviction, no effort at neon preservation can be truly successful.

## CHAPTER 3

### WHY NEON SIGNS MATTER

*“No other medium so aptly expresses the American spirit.”*

*- Sheila Swan and Peter Laufer, Neon Nevada<sup>138</sup>*

Municipal governments have the unenviable task of balancing the virtually unlimited priorities and agendas of its constituents in the way that satisfies all and disadvantages none. How best to solve homelessness, resist gentrification, attract tourism, provide a police force, maintain infrastructure, and preserve neon signs, along with countless other worthy priorities on a tight budget is a monumental task. Yet it is still what we ask our local government to do. Similarly, preservationists and advocates are also asked to balance conflicting priorities as to what places deserve saving, why, and who gets to decide. With your organization’s limited resources, do you fight for tax credits, coordinate walking tours, connect property owners with preservation contractors, or advocate for neon signs?

These of course are artificial dichotomies. The answer is that all these priorities are important, and what helps one very often helps the other. Not all can be done at full force at the same time, but the trick is to find balance and provide a seat at the table for worthy causes in all their diversity. Neon deserves to be part of the discussion for city leaders and nonprofit advocates – an important part that can benefit other areas as well. Before any discussion of how best to save neon signs can begin, it is therefore necessary to articulate why we would want to save neon signs in the first place.

Throughout their history, neon signs have elicited strong feelings, and it must be mentioned that even today some of those feelings can be negative. Old associations with vice and crime die hard, and neon signs continue to be prominent on old motels, liquor stores, strip clubs, and other venues sometimes perceived as seedy. Similarly, the beautification movement is alive and well. Beautification arose from a situation where signs may in fact have become too plentiful, where gorgeous works of architecture were completely obscured by advertisements and the fear of losing connection with the healing powers of the natural world was real. These are ultimately matters of taste, and while sign codes have done much to

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138 Swan and Laufer, *Neon Nevada*, viii.

curb the excesses they aimed to control, anti-sign advocates make valid points about the continued effects of over-stimulation and constant advertising on human society. Finally, the economic realities of business owners must be taken into consideration. There is no escaping the cost of neon. As a handcrafted exercise that is impossible to mechanize, neon is almost never the cheapest short-term option, and there are instances where LED substitution can be a viable alternative to complete loss of a sign.

These and other positions deserve to be considered. While an extremist position advocating for the preservation of every neon sign in every situation is not my intention, the evidence suggests that the benefits of preserving old neon signs far outweigh the costs. With smart policies that protect and incentivize neon preservation and focused advocacy explaining the benefits of neon signs such as this project proposes, the glowing benefits of neon can be shared by all. Heather David of the San Jose Signs Project notes that these benefits are myriad, and that the sum is greater than the parts: “A sign, by its very nature and definition, has multiple layers of meaning...It can be a work of fine craftsmanship, worthy of admiration and preservation...Connected, they form a web of human experience, and fill the pages in an area’s unique story.” The benefits of neon signs fall into five primary categories: placemaking, passion, cultural heritage, art, and environmentalism.

#### **A. Neon Signs Are Important Placemaking Elements**

Placemaking is a relatively recent term for an ancient concept: the elements of a physical environment that give a place its distinctive character matter. Often used in the planning profession in reference to interventions in the built environment meant to make a place more user-friendly, livable, and engaging, a broader understanding of placemaking also encompasses existing elements of the environment that make a place unique and contribute to community identity.

Kevin Lynch begins to identify what makes cities distinctive places and the qualities of objects that contribute to that sense of place in his 1964 study, *The Image of the City*, long before the term “placemaking” came into popular use. Lynch talks of “imageability” as “that quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer. It is that shape, color, or arrangement which facilitates the making of vividly identified, powerfully structured, highly useful mental images of the environment.”<sup>139</sup> Imageable objects are those which stick in a person’s memory and become critical components of a city’s environment. Lynch argues that a city replete with highly

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139 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1964), 9.

imageable objects is desirable and focuses his study on the form a city of imageability would take, identifying a “pattern of high continuity with many distinctive parts clearly interconnected” as ideal.<sup>140</sup> While he does not mention neon specifically, he does identify five components of a beautiful environment: meaning or expressiveness, sensuous delight, rhythm, stimulus, and choice. In essence, he posits that the ideal city is one full of interesting objects that work together to create an interconnected whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Neon signs, as expressive, beautiful, unique, stimulating pieces of artwork scattered throughout a cityscape fit this bill rather nicely and are important imageable components that contribute to a city’s sense of place.

### *I. Neon Signs as City-Defining Features*

“If a city can be read,” says *The Atlantic CityLab*’s Darran Anderson, “[signage] is a form of shorthand.”<sup>141</sup> Advertising signs, neon and otherwise, by their ubiquitous nature are impossible to ignore, making up a key component of the built environment. Neon signs especially, which are usually one-off creations and often historic, are particularly important placemakers, and their preservation protects the small, locally-owned businesses they represent, business that contribute to sense of place. “Local signs,” Anderson continues, “give cities their unique character in the face of encroaching hegemony where every main street looks the same, and small businesses are crushed by megaliths. They connect us to the past, to vernacular styles, to folklore.”<sup>142</sup> Thomas Rinaldi notes that older neon signs “stand for the importance of maintaining a balance between the offbeat and the mainstream,” providing the vital quirkiness necessary to stave off corporate hegemony and create vital local character.<sup>143</sup> Historic neon signs, as hand-crafted objects long-present in the environment, define places as memorable and distinctive, lending character to the places they inhabit and representing the very antithesis of homogeneity.

The NPS understood this important quality when it created its guidelines for the preservation of historic signs: “Historic signs give continuity to public spaces, becoming part of the community memory. They sometimes become landmarks in themselves, almost without regard for the building to which they are attached, or the property on which they stand.”<sup>144</sup> This is certainly true of Portland’s iconic White Stag sign, but also of other smaller landmark signs, in a way that transcends their original function as

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140 Ibid., 10.

141 Darran Anderson, “How Advertising Conquered Urban Space,” CityLab website, November 14, 2019.

[www.citylab.com/design/2019/11/ads-city-billboards-neon-signs-design-branding-history/601393](http://www.citylab.com/design/2019/11/ads-city-billboards-neon-signs-design-branding-history/601393) (accessed January 7, 2020).

142 Ibid.

143 Rinaldi, *New York Neon*, 48.

144 Auer, *The Preservation of Historic Signs*.

advertising. “The best signs do more than move products,” says *The Oregonian*, “they enter our civic psyche, becoming much more than part of the landscape. Great signs say something about who we are, and even what we aspire to be. Think about the landmark ‘Go By Train’ sign that glows above Union Station. It’s practically impossible to imagine Portland without it, even though trains are no longer the preferred mode of transportation for most folks.”<sup>145</sup>

America’s largest urban areas, New York and Los Angeles, display the degree to which neon can come to represent a place. Nathan Marsak explains the prevalence of neon in these cities and its appeal in *Los Angeles Neon*: “Every movie palace, dance hall, bar, and nightclub switches on their signage to draw us inside for the chance of finding love, escape, distraction, and danger. Flashing, blinking, glowing, undulating signage around every corner, from which there is no escape. New York has Times Square, that concentration of electricity that glows bright like a collapsing star. Los Angeles is such concentration exploded – like a shattering windshield scattering jeweled fragments across the city.”<sup>146</sup>

Los Angeles likely has more neon than anywhere in the country, but New York’s Times Square is perhaps the single location most defined by electric signage.<sup>147</sup> Electric billboards arrived in the *New York Times*’ namesake square as early as 1903, and their concentration, scale, and flamboyance became a draw greater than or equal to the entertainment district surrounding it. In the medium’s heyday of the 1930s there were 300 neon signs in Times Square seen by 1 million people a day. Two million tourists a month visited specifically to see the signs.<sup>148</sup> Times Square’s neon became the defining element of the nation’s largest city, and the area remains a must-visit attraction today even as the area has transitioned away from neon to LED picture screens.<sup>149</sup> Still, Thomas Rinaldi reminds us in *New York Neon* that “while the great electric billboards of Times Square and elsewhere have attracted more attention in both contemporary and historical studies, the smaller, more common on-premise signs advertising storefronts, restaurants, and theaters made a greater impact on the character of the urban landscape in New York and in cities and towns around the globe.”<sup>150</sup>

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145 Butler, “19 Iconic Portland Signs That Disappeared.”

146 Marsak, *Los Angeles Neon*, 26.

147 Exact counts of every neon sign in every city do not exist. Las Vegas may rightly dispute the claim that Times Square is more identified by neon than their city, but I choose to focus here on Times Square as an example that encompasses the trajectory of electronic signage beginning much earlier. See Lynxwiler, *Signs of Life*.

148 Ribbat, *Flickering Light*.

149 Jakle and Sculle, *Signs in America’s Auto Age*; Isenstadt, Petty, and Neumann, *Cities of Light*.

150 Rinaldi, *New York Neon*, 15.

These signs, of all shapes and sizes, define neighborhoods and cities all over the country, not just huge metropolises like New York and Los Angeles. From the massive painted Amoco sign in St. Louis' Hi-Pointe neighborhood to the shining marquee of the Roseway Theater in Portland's Roseway neighborhood, signs become synonymous with the neighborhoods where they reside.<sup>151</sup> Single signs can also come to represent entire cities. Portland's White Stag sign may be one of a few to display the city's name in bright lights, but it is far from the only illuminated sign to serve as stand-in for the entire city.<sup>152</sup>

The city perhaps most associated with a specific sign is not, as you might imagine, in the neon-friendly West, but a place more often associated with cobblestone streets and Founding Fathers: Boston. As Susan Bregman says in *New England Neon*, "The most beloved sign in Boston does not mark a colonial battle or commemorate a cultural milestone. It touts a petroleum company."<sup>153</sup> Originally erected in 1940 and altered to its current form in 1965, Boston's Citgo sign rests high on the rooftops of Kenmore Square just past the outfield of Major League Baseball's oldest stadium, Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox. This location has ensured millions of baseball fans have seen the sign on television for over 50 years; the sign has even been re-created at stadiums elsewhere as an homage. As with many treasures, the sign's value became most apparent when it became endangered. Bostonians responded to Citgo's 1982 threat to remove the sign with an outpouring of support, putting images of the sign on t-shirts, postcards, and all manner of paraphernalia. The sign was saved and, while the neon was replaced with LED as part of a 2005 refurbishment, no other elements were changed.<sup>154</sup>

In 2016, the sign was in danger again when the building underneath it was sold. As iconic as the sign was, the \$144 million price tag of the development deal meant significant other issues were at play. The city, buyers, sellers, and sign owner all reached a deal in principle to save the sign in 2017 but were never able to settle on rent. Preservationists sprung into action, but it took two years of review for the Boston Landmarks Commission to vote unanimously to declare the sign a landmark, making any changes

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151 Historic theaters are likewise often staples of neighborhoods, even more so when their marquees are lit in neon, as they often are. Rudi Stern explains "one's joy in going to the movies became inseparably associated with neon" (*The New Let There Be Neon*, 27).

152 It is worth noting, however, that in Darran Anderson's November 2019 CityLab article on urban advertising, the example he uses when describing how a sign can become so iconic that it comes to embody an entire city is none other than the White Stag.

153 Bregman, *New England Neon*, 17.

154 It is in instances like this – large spectacular neon signs – when neon seems most likely to be replaced with LED in the name of energy costs. It is also in these instances, where the sign is farthest away from the viewer, that the impacts of such a change are less noticeable. Such a change, while never an ideal option, is nonetheless an acceptable last-ditch alternative to complete loss of a sign that can potentially maintain National Register standards for integrity of location, setting, design, feeling, and association.



subject to review but also sticking the building's buyer with the sign if its owner, Citgo, were to go out of business. Mayor Martin J. Walsh then vetoed the landmark designation at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour thanks to a "backroom deal" with all parties ensuring that the sign would remain in place for 30 years, be elevated even higher for more visibility, and command higher rent. The peculiar outcome did not afford the sign landmark protection but did save it for the time being, "recognizing," according to a joint statement, "the significance that this sign has on our landscape in Boston."<sup>155</sup>

In another Colonial East Coast city, "there's really only one sign that dominates the skyline and for many Marylanders just screams Baltimore": the Domino Sugars sign overlooking Inner Harbor.<sup>156</sup> At 120x70 feet, its 650 tubes over 8400 square feet make it the second largest neon display on the East Coast. The sign has shown from its perch atop its namesake factory (the last of the industrial plants that once defined the area) since 1951 and remained lit except for a dark period during the 1970s energy crisis. Solar panels have even been placed on the roof to help power it. Residents brag about being able to see it from their windows, and it has been featured in countless paintings and movies to represent Baltimore. "It's Baltimore," says resident artist Robert McClintock. "It means you are home. I love neon. I love history." Artist Greg Otto continues, "It's as powerful as artist Edward Hopper's imagery. The sign speaks to so many people."<sup>157</sup>

Minneapolis' Grain Belt Beer sign shows why removing old signs when their namesake business has closed should not be a go-to solution. These "orphaned" signs can still have cultural significance to communities, and the potential to resurrect them remains as long as they stand – with or without their accompanying business. The Grain Belt Beer sign was built in 1941 but went dark in 1996 when the factory it advertised closed. But that factory was purchased by another beer company, Schell's, who negotiated for 14 years with the sign's owner to purchase it. Eventually proving successful, Schell's had the sign put on the National Register, launched a crowdsourced fundraiser, and re-lit the sign in 2017

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155 Tim Logan, "Deal Reached to Keep Citgo Sign in Kenmore Square," *Boston Globe*, November 29, 2018, [www.bostonglobe.com/business/2018/11/29/tentative-deal-reached-citgo-sign/QwIW2Ll3aErdA5rFOYZm7L/story.html](http://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2018/11/29/tentative-deal-reached-citgo-sign/QwIW2Ll3aErdA5rFOYZm7L/story.html) (accessed January 23, 2020).

156 Greenstein, *PreserveCast* interview with Nick Redding.

157 Jacques Kelly, "Domino Sugars Sign Is Equated with City," *Baltimore Sun*, November 3, 2007, [www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2007-11-03-0711030138-story.html](http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2007-11-03-0711030138-story.html) (accessed January 22, 2020).

(again replacing the neon with LED), 21 years after it had gone dark. “It’s a gem,” said the consultants who wrote the Register nomination, “a bodacious Minneapolis landmark.”<sup>158</sup>

Finally, closer to home, the small southern Oregon community of Grants Pass last year celebrated the re-lighting of their city-defining sign. The historic sign reads “Right lane for Redwood Empire – Oregon Caves – Golden Gate Bridge,” and was saved when an Oregon Department of Transportation Section 106 study on a nearby historic bridge identified it as potentially eligible for listing on the National Register.<sup>159</sup> The sign’s paint was fading and its neon tubes missing; the local tourism board wanted to replace it. Citizens fought back, and the money earmarked for the new sign was ultimately put to use to fix the existing one. “Thank goodness the people in town recognized how important the history is behind this sign,” said the City Council president at the re-dedication attended by 150 people (including the mayor, state representative, and local historic commission) and featuring 1940s cars and a brass band.<sup>160</sup> Mayor Roy Lindsay put it succinctly: “The bridge and sign represent what Grants Pass is.”<sup>161</sup> (Figure 35) Clearly, neon signs often come to define not just their place in the city but entire cities themselves.

## ***II. Sign Parks***

A recent development showcasing the placemaking power of neon signs is the growing number of sign parks dotting communities nationwide. While not as preferable as preservation of signs *in situ* because they remove signs from their context, sign parks represent a unique model for celebrating and creating sense of place, particularly when they are outdoors and contain signs native to the region. As a combination outdoor museum, public art space, and placemaking tool, sign parks have a benefit over indoor museums of keeping signs in the public sphere where they can be seen by everyone. Much like traditional museums, the act of curating a sign park can also encourage the public to see signs in a new way and increase awareness of and appreciation for neon elsewhere. What follows is a brief description of how neon sign parks in seven North American cities uniquely serve as placemaking components for their locales.

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158 Deanna Weniger, “Grain Belt Sign Lights Up Minneapolis Skyline Again after 21 Years,” *Twin Cities Pioneer Press*, December 30, 2017, [www.twincities.com/2017/12/30/grain-belt-sign-lights-up-minneapolis-skyline-again-after-21-years](http://www.twincities.com/2017/12/30/grain-belt-sign-lights-up-minneapolis-skyline-again-after-21-years) (accessed January 22, 2020).

159 Larissa Rudnicki, conversation with the author, November 2019.

160 John Stoeckl, “Grants Pass Historical Redwood Sign and Bridge Dedication,” KTLV News 10 website, May 3, 2019, <https://ktvl.com/news/local/grants-pass-historical-redwood-sign-and-bridge-dedication> (accessed January 23, 2020).

161 Ibid.

Casa Grande, Arizona's new neon sign park is the centerpiece of the local preservation commission and Main Street organization's downtown revitalization efforts, and in just over a year it has already become a prime attraction and catalyst for redevelopment and creativity in the small town.<sup>162</sup> Opened with a grand ceremony and operated by the Main Street group, the sign park was a team effort led by local advocate Marge Jantz, whom I met with during a research visit in March 2020. It features 14 mostly local signs displayed on a lot owned by the local newspaper. The park garnered national attention when it was awarded \$144,000 after receiving the second highest number of crowdsourced votes in the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Partners in Preservation Program sponsored by American Express.<sup>163</sup> The park has been thoroughly embraced by the community, which now uses a neon font inspired by the sign park in its branding campaign, on a nearby highway billboard, and as the cover of the Chamber of Commerce directory. It even led to a publicly-accessible vintage sign survey of the wider community, which identified 32 signs eligible for local landmark status and designated five.<sup>164</sup> (Figure 36)

Many sign parks are the direct result of the relentless persistence and vision of motivated individuals, and Saginaw, Michigan's Old Towne Sign Park is one of these. Historian Tom Mudd of the Saginaw Valley Historic Preservation Society began the park in 2006 with a single sign. The collection today consists of 15 signs placed in a city-owned parking lot and a mixed-use historic building housing restaurants and office space. Funding came initially from a statewide "Cool Cities" initiative aimed at attracting young workers and has continued through donations and help from the local community foundation. The building owner – who recognizes the business the signs bring in – pays for power and poles to mount the signs on. The local newspaper asked Mudd why he started the park: "'It lightens things up,' said Mudd, who believes in the power of neon to brighten a city's sense of place. 'These kinds of things add sparkle and fire to Old Town's atmosphere.'"<sup>165</sup> (Figure 37)

Vancouver, British Columbia kicked off its Lumiere winter light festival last November with an unveiling and lighting of three refurbished neon signs in a prominent public plaza. Following the festival, the signs are scheduled to move to a new adaptive reuse project in a former Canada Post building, where

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162 Melissa St. Aude, "Let There Be Light: New Neon Sign Park Now Illuminates Downtown," *Casa Grande Dispatch*, April 14, 2019, [www.pinalcentral.com/casa\\_grande\\_dispatch/area\\_news/let-there-be-light-new-neon-sign-park-now-illuminates/article\\_a2222499-1407-5296-a3ec-707acdb39bfc.html](http://www.pinalcentral.com/casa_grande_dispatch/area_news/let-there-be-light-new-neon-sign-park-now-illuminates/article_a2222499-1407-5296-a3ec-707acdb39bfc.html) (accessed January 22, 2020).

163 Casa Grande Neon Sign Park website, [www.neonsignpark.com](http://www.neonsignpark.com) (accessed January 22, 2020).

164 Marge Jantz, email exchange, March 14, 2020.

165 Jodi McFarland, "The Neon Lights Shine, but Saginaw's Historic Sign Park Needs Recognition," Michigan Live website, September 20, 2015, [www.mlive.com/opinion/saginaw/2015/09/post\\_7.html](http://www.mlive.com/opinion/saginaw/2015/09/post_7.html) (accessed January 22, 2020).

they will likely accessorize a public food hall. The signs were part of the Museum of Vancouver's collection and their re-lighting was funded by the Canada Post building project developer. Said museum CEO Mauro Vescera, "it's about taking these artifacts, which are really objects of civic history that come with stories, and moving them back into the city."<sup>166</sup> (Figure 38)

Preservationists are often the impetus behind these sign parks. Edmonton, Alberta has had an outdoor sign "museum" for years. Twenty signs are mounted on the windowless wall of a telephone switching building, and three additional signs stand nearby. The project was started by David Holdsworth, an urban designer in the city's heritage department, and was featured in 2009 when the city's overall preservation efforts received the Prince of Wales Award from Prince Charles. All signs are voluntarily refurbished and erected by members of the local Alberta Sign Association.<sup>167</sup> (Figure 39)

While preservationists are often enablers, they can just as easily be obstructionists. Neon Alley, the popular sign park in Pueblo, Colorado, only exists because local preservation district regulations would not allow neon signs on public streets. Lawyer Joe Koncilja's personal collection of 27 vintage and newly-commissioned signs in a small alley and nearby parking lot is "not only one of Pueblo's most-notable attractions but a source of fascination across the nation," having received coverage in over a dozen newspapers nationwide.<sup>168</sup> Seen by its creator as a free all-hours museum and public arts project, the sign draws 50-100 people a night. Luckily in this case preservation restrictions and neon aficionados both won in the end, an outcome that needn't be as rare as it is. (Figure 40)

The closest curated outdoor neon display to Portland is in Pomeroy, Washington, where David Webb has erected a number of signs from his personal Lost Highway Museum on the façade of his building and around town (on loan to private property owners) under the name Pomeroy City Walk. The signs' presence has helped spark a revival in tourism and civic pride in the tiny community.<sup>169</sup>

Finally, returning to Boston, the city's Rose Kennedy Greenway, a long urban park topping a buried freeway, recently featured an art exhibit of refurbished neon signs from around the state called

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166 Naoibh O'Connor, "Neon Signs Lit up for Lumiere Festival Destined for Exhibition at 'The Post,'" *Vancouver Courier*, November 1, 2019, [www.vancourier.com/news/neon-signs-lit-up-for-lumi%C3%A8re-festival-destined-for-exhibition-at-the-post-photos-1.23994301](http://www.vancourier.com/news/neon-signs-lit-up-for-lumi%C3%A8re-festival-destined-for-exhibition-at-the-post-photos-1.23994301) (accessed January 22, 2020).

167 Pat Brennan, "Neon Museum Salutes Edmonton's History," *Toronto Star*, December 21, 2018, [www.thestar.com/life/travel/2018/12/21/this-is-an-article-about-canadas-only-neon-museum-in-downtown-edmonton.html](http://www.thestar.com/life/travel/2018/12/21/this-is-an-article-about-canadas-only-neon-museum-in-downtown-edmonton.html).

168 Jon Pompia, "Classic Pueblo: Pueblo's Neon Alley a Hot Destination Spot," *Pueblo Chieftain*, July 13, 2019, [www.chieftain.com/news/20190713/classic-pueblo-pueblos-neon-alley-hot-destination-spot](http://www.chieftain.com/news/20190713/classic-pueblo-pueblos-neon-alley-hot-destination-spot) (accessed January 22, 2020).

169 Kerri Sandaine, "Neon Pomeroy," *Lewiston (ID) Tribune*, May 10, 2015, [https://lmtribune.com/sunday\\_am/neon-pomeroy/article\\_0ec47a88-43c8-5434-a272-af8f64a77634.html](https://lmtribune.com/sunday_am/neon-pomeroy/article_0ec47a88-43c8-5434-a272-af8f64a77634.html) (accessed January 22, 2020).

“GLOW, Neon Signs in Massachusetts, 1925-70.” The temporary exhibit of signs on loan from local sign collector Dave Waller was on display for about a year in 2018 and 2019, showing that neon sign parks can add to a place’s character even if only for a short time.<sup>170</sup> (Figure 41) At the same time, Waller also partnered with the nonprofit placemaking agency Beyond Walls in the neighboring community of Lynn to place a dozen historic neon signs throughout that city’s downtown core. The project, called Retrolit, is a partnership with the city and economic development agencies specifically aimed at bringing more light to the city’s cultural district to increase the area’s walkability.<sup>171</sup>

### *III. Activating the Night*

The Retrolit project highlights a final important way neon signs uniquely serve as placemaking elements: their ability to activate the nighttime hours. Neon “keeps a city’s spirits up in the wee small hours,” its illumination making streets safer and making economic activity viable after the sun goes down.<sup>172</sup> The extended daylight brought on by early electric lights promoted safety based on the belief that crime decreases in well-lit areas. (Figure 42) It also facilitated the rapid movement of vehicles that could go faster when drivers were able to more easily see potential obstacles. In short, electric lights, including neon, made the city functional at night.<sup>173</sup> The placemaking power of nighttime lighting is promoted by the International Nighttime Design Initiative, which asserts: “urban lighting can transform the way a city operates at night. Ultimately, the goal...is to increase safety and security, stimulate economic growth, improve public health, and increase social interactions into the night hours for cities around the world.”<sup>174</sup>

Along with essentially doubling the available productive hours in a day, nighttime illumination has proven a popular way to encourage placemaking through a growing number of urban light festivals.<sup>175</sup> Portland’s own Winter Light Festival marked its fifth year in February 2020. Run by the Willamette Light Brigade – which also commissions designs and funds projects that illuminate the city’s bridges – the festival features performances, a bike ride, lantern parade, storytelling, science talks, and dozens of light-based artworks around the city.<sup>176</sup> These events highlight the power of light to make a place, and

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170 Victoria Solan, “GLOW, 2018,” The Greenway website, [www.rosekennedygreenway.org/glow](http://www.rosekennedygreenway.org/glow) (accessed January 22, 2020).

171 “Retrolit,” Beyond Walls website, [www.beyond-walls.org/retrolit](http://www.beyond-walls.org/retrolit) (accessed February 4, 2020).

172 Tom Downs, forward to Barna, *San Francisco Neon*, vii.

173 Jakle, *City Lights*.

174 Portland State University architecture professor Jeff Schnabel serves on the organization’s board. International Nighttime Design Initiative website, <https://nighttimedesign.org> (accessed January 22, 2020).

175 Isenstadt, Petty, and Neumann, *Cities of Light*.

176 Portland Winter Light Festival website, [www.pdxwlf.com](http://www.pdxwlf.com) (accessed January 22, 2020).

while the placemaking, economic, and safety benefits of nighttime illumination are not unique to neon, the noble gas does contribute to the benefits a lighted urban night provide.

## **B. Neon Signs Inspire Passion**

Equally importantly, neon signs matter because people love them, and it is the responsibility of a representative government to represent the will of the people. The value of joy as a virtue in and of itself is equally important. This value can be easy to overlook or dismiss, but the pieces of the world – big and small – that inspire passion beyond quantification are important components of a life worth living. The fact that neon is fun, that its quirks and showmanship provide entertainment, that it is captivating and beguiling – these factors are not to be dismissed.<sup>177</sup> “A favorite object is a symbol,” says Donald A. Norman in *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things*, “setting up a positive frame of mind, a reminder of pleasant memories, or sometimes an expression of one’s self.”<sup>178</sup> More than just an object to be noticed, neon signs become extensions of self.

On a more macro scale, in his influential philosophical treatise on city planning, *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch reminds us that it is important to see a city not just as an object but to consider how it is perceived by its inhabitants.<sup>179</sup> Today, many people perceive neon as a treasure, and the passion it inspires is an important part of its value. “The same ‘junkyard’ decried by [pop artist] Peter Blake as an ‘interminable wasteland’ of ‘billboards, jazzed-up diners, used-car lots, drive-in movies, be-flagged gas stations, and garish motels’ [has] become a treasure trove of ‘roadside Americana.’ Neon lit the way.”<sup>180</sup>

### **I. Popularity**

Nonprofit groups devoted to or including neon signs as primary focal points are numerous. The broad roadside preservation focus of the Society for Commercial Archeology includes a prominent focus on signage, and a regular signage column has appeared in every issue of the organization’s multiple publications for years. Debra Jane Setlzer, scholar of roadside America who has devoted her life to documenting historic signs and roadside buildings nationwide, authors these regular columns. Groups from San Francisco Neon (who now sponsors an annual neon conference bringing together historians, practitioners, and enthusiasts from around the world) to Denver’s Save the Signs to the new upstart PDX

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177 Freeman, *Good Old Neon*, vi.

178 Donald A. Norman, *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 6.

179 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1964).

180 Rinaldi, *New York Neon*, 41.

Neon show a continued devotion to organizing around the signs people love. Much of this work is facilitated online, with the number of Facebook groups, Flickr accounts, and Instagram handles devoted to neon signs too numerous to count. Perhaps most prominent is Signs United, which pools the resources of many of the nation's top neon advocates to help preserve endangered signs, but Portland also has its own @portlandneon Instagram handle devoted to the city's neon.

Many individuals are so inspired by neon that they re-create it in different media. Reagan Ray's "Signs of Austin" project, a series of 38 drawings of historic signs from the Texas capital complete with tidbits of history, has received coverage on National Public Radio and *The Atlantic*. He explains that as he walked about the city, he "started to admire the beautiful old signage that featured hand-cut lettering, exposed neon, and blinking bulbs amongst a sea of new construction. I started to photograph the signs for fun and decided one day to illustrate a few. As time went on, I started to notice the signs coming down and the stores going out of business. I realized that a new Austin was taking over and the charm of my once small city was disappearing. The sign project turned into a goal of 100 illustrations to document Austin's rich history."<sup>181</sup>

In Fresno, CA, Chris Riley was inspired to make 18-inch acrylic models of vintage signs from around the state, a project he has been working on for two years. Articulating the impetus for this fandom, an Atlas Obscura article notes, "As the state's population swells, and its once-funky places gentrify, [photographers] are racing to document the signs they love – taking and sharing photos, rendering skillful sketches, making miniature scale models – before they get knocked down to make way for condos and Walmarts."<sup>182</sup>

It is not just individuals and enthusiast groups getting excited about neon, however. When Atlas Obscura asked its thousands of readers to name their favorite landmark signs as part of its Landmark Week 2018, only two of the 34 featured were not neon. The response to the request was overwhelming: "Sometimes when you ask the universe (or in this case, the internet) for a sign, you get over 500 [in four days]." Of note is the fact that Atlas Obscura specializes in offbeat attractions and regularly polls its readers, so an admission of an "overwhelming" response is especially indicative of the love people have for neon. The article also calls out Portland's White Stag sign (along with Minneapolis' Grain Belt Beer sign) as the sign with the most individual responses, indicating that of all the signs in all the country that

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181 Reagan Ray, The Signs of Austin website, <https://thesignsofaustin.com> (accessed January 21, 2020).

182 Jody Amable, "Meet California's Nerds of Neon," Atlas Obscura, October 4, 2019, [www.atlasobscura.com/articles/california-vintage-neon-sign-photo-model](http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/california-vintage-neon-sign-photo-model).

people love, the most beloved is right here in Portland.<sup>183</sup> This would not have surprised the former owner of the building the signs stands on, Art DeMuro, who said in 2009 when its future was uncertain, "I cannot go anywhere without someone asking me about the sign. It is obviously very important to a lot of people."<sup>184</sup>

Neon as a "look" is so appealing to a mass audience today that even its primary competition clothes itself in the language of neon. Marketing itself to hip young adults, the Brite Lite company was born in 2016 to sell one product: customizable text-based LED lights, which it sells under the trademark "New Neon." Available in a choice of pre-determined computer-created fonts, "neon" colors, and sizes, the manufacturers of this machine-produced plastic product have gone out of their way not to distinguish it from neon but to co-opt the medium's mystique, touting it as the new affordable technological evolution of a beloved icon while nevertheless neglecting the inspiration's handmade nature.<sup>185</sup>

## ***II. Economic Impact***

All of this passion amounts to more than good feelings however – it translates to economic impact. While a complete study of the economic impact of neon signage is beyond the scope of this project, it stands to reason that people spend money at businesses they are attracted to. If people do indeed like neon, they are more likely to go into a particular shop because it has a neon sign. For this reason, business owners who understand the economic value of their neon signs think of them as integral parts of their business model. New York City's Holland Bar and Coffee Shop illustrates the lengths to which a business owner will go to keep his neon sign when it is seen as a marketing tool closely tied to the business' commercial identity: when the restaurant had to leave its original location in the 1980s, its 1949 neon sign came along for the ride. Despite being too big for their new storefront, the sign was considered an indisputable part of the business and was hung inside over the bar instead.<sup>186</sup> In the modern experience economy, neon signs have also become highly Instagram-able, providing impactful free advertising to business owners with every snapshot and social media post. In a capitalist society, there is

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183 Eric Grandhauser, "Atlas Obscura Readers' Favorite Landmark Signs," Atlas Obscura website, July 27, 2018, [www.atlasobscura.com/articles/iconic-landmark-signs](http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/iconic-landmark-signs) (accessed January 21, 2020).

184 Anna Griffin, "A Solution for Sign Imbroglio? Yes, but ..." *Portland Oregonian*, November 11, 2009, [https://proxy.multicolib.org:2489/apps/news/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\\_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc\\_dat=AMNEWS&req\\_dat=0D10F2CADB4B24C0&rft\\_val\\_format=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft\\_dat=document\\_id%3Anews%252F12BEFE8DEFB27300](https://proxy.multicolib.org:2489/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AMNEWS&req_dat=0D10F2CADB4B24C0&rft_val_format=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F12BEFE8DEFB27300). (accessed January 20, 2020).

185 Brite Lite website, <https://britelitetribe.com> (accessed January 24, 2020).

186 Rinaldi, *New York Neon*.



little incentive to continue to spend money and resources on a marketing tool like a sign that does not bring customers in the door, and the continued presence of neon and its recent revival are testament to its economic impact.

Further, re-lighting ceremonies of neon signs are major publicity events. When Len Davidson, author of *Vintage Neon* and founder of the Neon Museum of Philadelphia, restored the city's Levi's Hot Dog sign after the business closed, the mayor of the city of 1.5 million, the 5<sup>th</sup> largest in the country, flipped the switch at the re-lighting, which was attended by hundreds of Philadelphians from all walks of life.<sup>187</sup>

### ***III. Bringing Diverse Audiences into Preservation***

The accessibility of neon, inspiring passion equally among digital-native teens and nostalgic Baby Boomers alike, is another critical component of why it is worth saving. Objects of the built environment with such diverse appeal are few and far between. Some of this appeal can be explained by the diverse places that neon signs represent: "Other than the citizens themselves, there are few more immediate indicators of the multi-ethnicity of urban populations than the pop-up idiosyncratic signage of shops, cafés, and restaurants."<sup>188</sup> Diverse audiences see themselves represented in neon and are thus attracted to it. Preserving neon signs thus becomes an important way to preserve cultures.

There is a valuable opportunity here for the preservation community, too long subsumed by the values of the elite but now working diligently to broaden its representation and appeal. Many who would not otherwise align themselves with a preservation movement they see as elitist, obstructionist, or stodgy are strong advocates for saving neon signs. Many of these are members of younger generations. "It's young kids that really get off on it," says the developer of Pueblo, Colorado's Neon Alley of his neon signs. "It's girls that come down for glamour photos by the 'Hollywood' sign. It's them and their boyfriends, who will play music and dance."<sup>189</sup>

The owner of the @portlandneon Instagram handle, Ron Bronson, is indicative of those who wouldn't use the term "preservationist" but are drawn to historic objects of the built environment like neon signs. A tech worker and former city administrator who moved to Portland in 2018, Bronson had traveled extensively and always had a curiosity about "old things," but it was Portland's incredible

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187 Len Davidson, *Vintage Neon* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2000).

188 Anderson, "How Advertising Conquered Urban Space."

189 Pompia, "Classic Pueblo."

collection of neon signs, unlike anything he had seen elsewhere in his travels, that inspired him to create an Instagram handle specific to the city's glowing icons, grand and small alike, but all unique. Through his work on @portlandneon, Bronson learned that there were others who also loved neon signs, an entire hashtag-connected community that he was now a part of. Today his posts always garner 60+ likes and his followers grow with each one. Businesses have even begun to contact him to come and photograph their signs for the publicity his posts generate. His effort to catch the city's neon signs while they still shine throughout the city is the work of preservation and led Bronson to proclaim, "I didn't realize I was a preservationist, but I guess I am!" Critically, Bronson loves neon of all kinds, new and old alike, and recognizes their association with locally owned businesses.<sup>190</sup> These are messages that preservationists should pay attention to as the field continues to debate the value of the "50-year rule" and expands efforts to preserve not just buildings but the cultures and businesses that occupy them.

The passion these diverse neon enthusiasts have for signs provides an easy and natural avenue for preservationists to engage with them about the preservation of other elements of the built environment that matter to them and break down barriers to entry that continue to plague the field. Leaving their interest on the table is a grave oversight by the preservation community, but the opportunities neon provides to funnel this passion into preservation advocacy is enormous. Many people from many backgrounds simply love neon, and the fact that these signs matter to people means they are worth saving. "Their enduring ability to stir strong feelings is a testament to the significance of neon signs as works of design and as objects of cultural heritage."<sup>191</sup>

### **C. Neon Signs Are Part of Our Cultural Heritage**

Part of why neon signs make for such effective placemaking and inspire so many people is because, like all historic elements of the built environment, they become a part of our cultural heritage. Any old neon sign still standing in a city is a survivor if ever there was one. Figures on how many neon signs survive compared with those that have been erected are impossible, but to say that less than 1% of once-existing signs still exist would not be a stretch. Extant neon signs are extremely rare cultural artifacts representing our communal heritage.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Ron Bronson, conversation with the author, January 16, 2020.

<sup>191</sup> Rinaldi, *New York Neon*, 117.

<sup>192</sup> In addition, they are cheaper and logistically easier to save than buildings. This generalization is based on the sheer size of signs compared to buildings. While the largest signs can cost over \$100,000 to restore, many more can benefit greatly from

The idea that neon signs can be objects of heritage is linked to the vernacular architecture movement and based on the idea that our collective memory is found in the places that make up our everyday experiences. Today, the value of old signs is commonly understood by the general population. The 2012 BrandSpark / *Better Homes and Gardens* American Shopper Survey polled over 100,000 consumers in all 50 states and found that 77% agreed with the statement, “Vintage signs are worth preserving due to their historic and cultural value.” Only 4% disagreed.<sup>193</sup> This is a remarkably high percentage of individuals directly supporting a historic preservation response to old signs because they understand their value as part of our heritage.

Few things are more a part of our everyday experience than advertising, but these seemingly banal objects hold meaningful stories about who we are as a people, what we value, and how we interact with the world. “Advertising is everywhere. We may try to shut it out, but it reflects who we are (or want to be) and connects us to the urban past...Advertisements tell us about much more than the products and services they promote. They tell us about desire, how it changes, and how it and thus we are manipulated....it can connect us to the past, to the local, and to senses of meaning.”<sup>194</sup> When he talks about restoring neon signs, tube bender Paul Greenstein doesn’t talk about just fixing something up, he considers himself a courier from the past to the future, transmitting information from a different time into the present.<sup>195</sup>

The cultural heritage signs are preserving is often that of the common man, the local business, the ethnic minority – those who have little opportunity for their voices and stories to be heard. And they have often been fixtures of communities for generations. As NPS Preservation Brief 25 notes, “They often reflect the ethnic makeup of a neighborhood and its character, as well as the social and business activities carried out there. By giving concrete details about daily life in a former era, historic signs allow the past to speak to the present in ways that buildings by themselves do not. And multiple surviving historic signs on the same building can indicate several periods in its history or use. In this respect, signs are like

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under \$10,000, a modest sum compared to the cost of restoring most buildings. They can also be moved much more easily if need be.

193 James J. Kellaris, “100,000 Shoppers Can’t Be Wrong: Signage Communication Evidence from the BrandSpark / Better Homes and Gardens American Shopper Study,” presentation to the National Signage Research & Education Conference, University of Cincinnati, October 10-11, 2012, <https://signresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/BrandSpark-Better-Homes-and-Gardens-American-Shopper-Study2011.pdf> (accessed April 22, 2020).

194 Anderson, “How Advertising Conquered Urban Space.”

195 Greenstein, *PreserveCast* interview with Nick Redding.

archeological layers that reveal different periods of human occupancy and use.”<sup>196</sup> Thomas Rinaldi further articulates how the disappearance of a neon sign is often felt by communities as the disappearance of a “real” place, a place that “symbolize[s] the ‘soul’ of the city.”<sup>197</sup> Neon signs are touchstones of a community’s historic identity, and Rinaldi views his neon sign photography as curating and documenting these artifacts that exist in the open-air museum of the cityscape.

As further testament to the importance of signs as cultural heritage, many are now featured in or are the sole subject of a growing number of museums. These repositories and interpreters of cultural heritage value neon enough that they have either added neon signs to their collections or come into being for the express purpose of preserving neon signs. Many of these museums are local historical societies, but major players in the museum world – including the Henry Ford Museum and the Smithsonian National Museum of American History – began adding neon to their collections as early as the 1970s. While this approach is not as ideal a preservation solution as keeping a sign in its original context and freely available to the public, it nevertheless provides an avenue for allowing neon signs to share their stories and is a testament to their value as artifacts worthy of preservation.<sup>198</sup>

San Francisco’s Tenderloin Museum began in 2009 with an effort to list the namesake neighborhood on the National Register and install plaques around the district to highlight its historic significance in the face of disinvestment. A physical space was added in 2015 and has since regularly featured exhibits on neon, which are a distinguishing feature of the neighborhood’s landscape. These exhibits, which have included “Neon Home, Neon Family: A Tribute to Roxy Rose” and “Neon Moments: The One-Stop Shops that Shape the Tenderloin” are supplemented by regular walking tours in partnership with the San Francisco Neon nonprofit.<sup>199</sup> Along with being main fixtures of other regional history museums like the Yakima Valley Museum in Washington or Southern California’s Valley Relics Museum, there are now five museums spread throughout the country focused exclusively on signs and neon, and one more set to open this year. (Figure 43)

The first museum dedicated solely to neon was Southern California’s Museum of Neon Art (MONA), founded in 1981 by neon artist Lili Lakich to provide a venue for the growing number of neon

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196 Auer, *The Preservation of Historic Signs*.

197 Rinaldi, *New York Neon*, 13.

198 As a comparison, who among us would rather see ancient Egyptian obelisks or British jewels in a museum than where they were made to be displayed? Museums are excellent last resorts but are a pale comparison to viewing artifacts “in the wild.”

199 Tenderloin Museum website, [www.tenderloinmuseum.org](http://www.tenderloinmuseum.org) (accessed January 23, 2020).

artists to show their skill. The museum played a major role in neon art gaining prominence in the art world and helped spark the neon revival that followed.<sup>200</sup> Today the museum features historic signs as well as neon fine art and is housed in a new building on a prime piece of real estate in downtown Glendale. (Figure 44)

The 1990s saw the addition of the wildly popular Neon Museum – whose neon “boneyard” of old signs covers multiple Las Vegas lots and recently featured a guest exhibition by director Tim Burton – and the American Sign Museum – a 20,000 square foot space in Cincinnati founded by an editor of the sign industry’s trade magazine (Figure 45). Two more neon museums opened in 2018, when sign artists and collectors opened their collections to the public: Tucson, Arizona’s Ignite Sign Art Museum and, right here in The Dalles, Oregon, the National Neon Sign Museum, which occupies a prime downtown location in the former Elks Temple (Figure 46).

A similar story is playing out currently in Pennsylvania, where neon artist, scholar, and collector Len Davidson, author of *Vintage Neon*, is scheduled to open his Neon Museum of Philadelphia this year. Davidson had been leasing his signs to local businesses for years so they could be viewed by the public. Two years ago, Drexel University approached him about displaying some of his collection in an old Firestone tire shop the college had recently purchased. The resulting collection of 29 signs and interpretive panels were meant to be temporary but have remained for years thanks to their popularity. In 2019, a permanent home for the collection was secured by way of the adaptive reuse of an old grocery wholesale building into the NextFab makerspace. Davidson will create a dedicated museum space at NextFab as well as display signs throughout the 21,000 square foot warehouse amidst the artisan shops and restaurants that will soon fill it.<sup>201</sup> When Philadelphia’s museum opens later this year, the number of sign museums in the country will have doubled in just the last 3 years. This uptick not only shows the popularity and value of neon as worthy of preservation in museums, but also the extreme danger the signs face in the wild with the increasing need to preserve them by any means necessary.

This struggle is apparent in Albuquerque today. Local auto magnate Carlos Garcia is the center of hot debate about the best way to preserve neon signs and the role of museums in that milieu. Garcia has reportedly been purchasing scores of signs from around the state, in various states of repair but often

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200 Ribbat, *Flickering Light*.

201 Michaela Winberg, “The Neon Museum of Philadelphia Has Found a Permanent Home,” *BillyPenn*, August 11, 2019, <https://billypenn.com/2019/08/11/the-neon-museum-of-philadelphia-has-found-a-permanent-home> (accessed January 23, 2020).

still standing in their original location and storing them in order to soon open a museum in New Mexico's largest city. Preservationists, sign aficionados, and members of the general public remain split on the value of this approach, with the acclaim of those who hail Garcia as a hero saving signs from disappearing equaling the wail of those who decry his actions as cultural plundering of resources that belong in their home communities.<sup>202</sup> Either way, neon sign museums have not only pulled their weight as cultural heritage institutions, they are also proving to be attractive business propositions.

#### **D. But is it Art? (Yes)**

Art is a notoriously difficult term to define, and it is not my intention to retread the history of this contentious debate, but it is my assertion that neon – whether the medium of fine art sculpture or the light showing the way to your next bite to eat – does function as art in contemporary society, and art is worth saving. “Advertising may well be the ‘official art’ of capitalist society.”<sup>203</sup> Neon signs serve as art in a number of different capacities.

First, neon signs serve as art because of their method of creation, which requires a similar skill, creativity, and craftsmanship to any artistic media. Bending the glass tubes that contain the neon gas into their intricate forms is incredibly difficult and technical, with seven years of apprenticeship generally needed to become an accomplished bender.<sup>204</sup> Much like painters or sculptors, tube benders have their own signatures, a distinctive “handwriting” that comes through in their individual works.<sup>205</sup> The British Heritage Crafts Association, presided over by HRH The Prince of Wales, recognized the craftsmanship that characterizes neon when tube bending was added to its new Red List of Endangered Crafts in 2019. This year, neon bender Richard Weaver was one of five awardees in a crowded competition who received a grant from the organization's Endangered Crafts Fund. The grant will allow him to build a mobile teaching facility to take around Britain in order to introduce more young people to this rarified craft.<sup>206</sup> The same cannot be said for LED, which is decidedly not a craft. While it does a decent job of mimicking the look of neon, it gets to this look in a very different way. LED lights and components are

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202 Ron Warnick, “New Mexico Route 66 Association Wades into, Then Retreats from Sign-Preservation Issue,” Route 66 News website, September 10, 2019, [www.route66news.com/2019/09/10/new-mexico-route-66-association-wades-into-then-retreats-from-sign-preservation-issue](http://www.route66news.com/2019/09/10/new-mexico-route-66-association-wades-into-then-retreats-from-sign-preservation-issue) (accessed January 23, 2020).

203 Jakle and Sculle, *Signs in America's Auto Age*, 97.

204 Greenstein, *PreserveCast* interview with Nick Redding.

205 Ryan J. Bush, “10 Seconds,” Vimeo video, 6:01, September 24, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/107112035>.

206 Daniel Carpenter, “Five Grants Awarded to Help Save Endangered Crafts,” Heritage Crafts Association website, October 23, 2019, <https://heritagecrafts.org.uk/five-grants-awarded-to-help-save-endangered-crafts> (accessed January 23, 2020).

factory-made and their assembly into a sign requires all the craftsmanship of bending a flexible vinyl tube and filling it with tiny plastic lightbulbs, if a human hand touches it at all. While LED is not without its merits, craftsmanship is not among them.

The craftsmanship required to make neon and the creativity that goes into its sign design results in an artistry and playfulness that, if not unique to neon, certainly finds one of its most vibrant expressions in the glowing tubes. Artists beginning in the 1960s began to recognize this when, spurred on by the popularity of the Pop Art movement, they began to use neon as a medium for fine art. One of the most prominent of these neon artists, Rudi Stern, does not limit the label of “art” to fine art however, but recognizes the artistry inherent in all neon signs. “In the days that preceded white plastic anonymity,” he says, “neon was a highly refined folk art form with great individuality...artistic feats of technical virtuosity.”<sup>207</sup> Chicago neon historian Nick Freeman further contrasts the artistry and local character of neon with the staid, mass-produced signs that followed: “Today these vibrant, unique artifacts have been largely replaced by charmless, rear-lit Lexan panel signs and the channel lettering of national chains.”<sup>208</sup>

It is not just sign artists and photographers who see neon signs as art, however. The NPS agrees when it reminds modern preservationists that “in an age of uniform franchise signs and generic plastic ‘box’ signs, historic signs often attract by their individuality: by a clever detail, a daring use of color and motion, or a reference to particular people, shops, or events...Neon is another great twentieth-century contribution to the signmaker’s art...neon offered signmakers an opportunity to mold light into an infinite variety of shapes, colors, and images.”<sup>209</sup> Individuality, detail, use of color and motion, molding light...this is the poetic language of art from the pen of the nation’s preservation regulatory body. It serves as a reminder that there is something uniquely magical about neon.

The question remains, however: why does it matter if a neon sign is art or not? What makes art worth saving? Donald Norman gets at some of this question, especially as it relates to vernacular objects like signs, in *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things*. In it, he relates how the presence of things that are nice to look at makes our lives better on a subconscious level. “Cognitive scientists understand that emotion is a necessary part of life,” he says. “One of the ways by which emotions work is through neurochemicals that bathe particular brain centers and modify perception, decision making, and behavior. These neurochemicals change the parameters of thought...We now have

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207 Stern, *The New Let There Be Neon*, 36.

208 Freeman, *Good Old Neon*, vi.

209 Auer, *The Preservation of Historic Signs*.

evidence that aesthetically pleasing objects enable you to work better...products and systems that make you feel good are easier to deal with and produce more harmonious results.”<sup>210</sup> This phenomenon is similar to the experience many people feel when they get a confidence boost by wearing nice clothes. The idea is that seeing art, including neon signs, can literally make you happier.<sup>211</sup> Attractive things, Norman argues, work better, and he breaks down the cognitive and emotional reaction to attractiveness into three levels: visceral (appearance); behavioral (pleasure and effectiveness of use); and reflective (buoying self-image, personal satisfaction, memories). Neon signs, which in so many cases were designed to elicit an emotional response and not simply convey information, seem to embody this kind of connection in a way that newer, mass produced signage does not. Like Google with its daily Doodles or Googie architecture with its extravagant swoops and starbursts, neon signs put the “fun” in functionality, creating art and, as Norman might argue, making people happier in the process.

Additionally, neon signs function as an inspiration *for* and subject *of* art. Glowing signs are often used in visual art in all media as a metaphor for an urban area, but it is also featured regularly as simply a representation of itself – the sign itself becomes worthy of reproduction in other artistic media such as photography or, as we saw earlier, as illustrations or models. The scores of coffee table and fine art books featuring photographs of neon signs may be evidence enough, but an additional example is worth mentioning here. Suhita Shirodkar is a native of Bombay now living in the Bay Area who was so inspired by the artistic value of San Jose’s collection of historic signs that she began sketching as many of them as possible. These sketches were the subject of a 2018 exhibition at History San Jose funded by the Knight Foundation and resulted in a book of 80 favorites. Noting both her passion and the heritage value of signs Shirodkar says, “Through my sketches I hope to bring attention to these pieces of our history. I record them as they stand today: sometimes restored, but more often forgotten and falling apart, yet quite beautiful. They are a link to a way of life that is almost gone.”<sup>212</sup> As she talks about the importance of documenting these vernacular artifacts before they are gone and lists their addresses so others can visit and appreciate them too, Shirodkar is doing the advocacy work of preservation through her art, even if she wouldn’t call herself a preservationist.

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210 Norman, *Emotional Design*, 10.

211 It is worth noting that not all art is intended to be attractive or make the viewer happy. The provocative purposes of art are equally valid but bear less relevance to neon signs, which by their nature exist to attract rather than provoke.

212 Suhita Shirodkar, “Vintage Signs: San Jose, California” (artist’s website), [www.vintagesignsanjose.com](http://www.vintagesignsanjose.com) (accessed January 9, 2020).



## **E. Neon Signs Are a Green Technology**

No matter how much people love it, or how closely it becomes associated with a place and its history, no matter how beautiful it is, when faced with the modern environmental crisis of climate change neon signs must pass muster before today's preservationists or city leaders put forth efforts to save them. Luckily, neon holds its own as a green technology, despite the claims of the LED salespeople who dominate the online dialogue regarding lighting efficiency. In much the same way that LEED certification has long been criticized by the preservation community for not taking into account the embodied energy present in extant structures built to last, proponents of LED lighting miss the environmental value of repair over replacement as well as the energy savings of objects built to last. Despite being touted as an environmental upgrade to neon for years (and even receiving government subsidies), LEDs may do more to line the pockets of LED salesmen than save the planet from climate change.

"Adapting neon to LEDs," say Al Barna and Randall Ann Homan in their definitive guide to neon sign preservation practice, "turns an artful treasure that can last more than 50 years, made from sustainable and recyclable materials by skilled hands, into a thing that is unrecyclable and made chiefly from unsustainable petroleum products, a thing that may not last even a decade."<sup>213</sup> Barna and Homan touch on two key components of neon's environmental value and why it is worth saving: materials and longevity.

Each of the major components of a neon sign – glass tubes, electrodes, transformers, wires, sheet metal – are reusable, recyclable, and relatively non-toxic. Even the gas itself is nonflammable, colorless, and highly stable, and its release into the atmosphere causes no environmental damage.<sup>214</sup> While their cabinets can be similar to neon, LED signs are composed of considerably more non-recyclable plastic. When LED is used to mimic neon in exposed tubes, the tubes themselves are plastic and the frame is also usually plastic. LED lights themselves are plastic as well, like a tiny string of high-tech Christmas lights stuffed into a tube. Currently none of these components are recyclable.

Further, while claims to the longevity of LED are rampant, the technology simply is not old enough to bear out these claims with solid evidence. Regardless of the life expectancy of LED lights, the fact remains that the technology continues to progress rapidly, meaning that, like many throwaway

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213 Al Barna and Randall Ann Homan, *Saving Neon: A Best Practices Guide* (San Francisco: Giant Orange Press, 2018), 11.

214 Johnson, *Spectacular*.

products of the modern consumer age, LED lights are designed for planned obsolescence. Just like your mobile phone, LED technology's constant evolution means that even if the lights would last for decades they are much more likely to be replaced when the newest model comes out in a few years.<sup>215</sup> Similarly, when LEDs break, the entire tube must be replaced, as there is no capability to just replace parts.

Neon, however, has been proven to last for decades when properly maintained. When kept indoors, neon signs can easily last 80 years. Weather, birds, and vandalism can occasionally cause issues for outdoor signs, but when maintained regularly, these signs can go 10 years without an issue and 50 years without any major problems.<sup>216</sup> "Neon will pretty much last until you break it," says an Austin tube bender. "It's not like a light bulb, or a fluorescent tube. It doesn't have a life span."<sup>217</sup> The value of this longevity is well-known to preservationists and is at the heart of the profession. Fixing something that already exists is inherently more sustainable than replacing it outright, and neon signs are built in a way that individual components can easily be replaced without having to replace the whole thing. Therefore, a technology that has the capability to last for decades and lends itself to repair (neon), rather than requiring replacement (LED), is going to be a greener choice.

Finally, there is a good bit of debate about the relative energy efficiency of neon vs. LED lights. A light source that uses less electricity requires less energy generation and can be a greener choice, especially if that energy is generated from fossil fuels like much American energy still is. Much of the hype surrounding LED is based on this efficiency argument – the idea that because they consume less energy they are not only less expensive to run but also greener. There are many in the neon world who believe this claim is either outright wrong or needs a qualifier. Sign artist Paul Greenstein says that neon actually pulls less or equivalent power to LED, noting a typical 15-volt transformer working on 30 milliamps of power costs pennies a day to run.<sup>218</sup>

Key to this argument is the relative brightness of the two technologies. There is no debate that both neon and LED consume much less power relative to brightness than either incandescent or

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215 Kevin Keljo, owner of Portland's Security Signs, confirms that LED is usually replaced completely within 10 years, while neon can last 40+ years.

216 Clifton's Cafeteria in downtown Los Angeles contains what is believed to be the longest continuously lit neon tube in America, which has not been turned off since 1935, 85 years ago. It was discovered still glowing behind a wall inside the building during recent renovations (Greenstein, *PreserveCast* interview with Nick Redding).

217 Stephie Grob Plante, "Neon City," *Curbed* website, December 12, 2017, [www.curbed.com/2017/12/12/16735474/neon-signs-austin-texas](http://www.curbed.com/2017/12/12/16735474/neon-signs-austin-texas) (accessed January 7, 2020).

218 Greenstein, *PreserveCast* interview with Nick Redding.

fluorescent lights.<sup>219</sup> When neon efficiency is pitted against LED considering brightness, the results are generally even. Evan Gillespie of Hunker provides perhaps the most even-keeled explanation when he demonstrates that one foot of neon left on for 12 hours a day uses about 16 kilowatt hours of power per year. He continues: “Light-emitting diodes are suggested as energy-efficient alternatives to neon tubes, but the comparisons, which often claim a 90 percent energy savings for LED, often fail to take into account the relative inefficiency of LED light sources as compared to neon. While an LED light source of a similar color and size to neon may consume less power, a foot of LED tube lighting left on for 12 hours per day may consume as little as 3.5 kWh per year; the LED typically outputs much less light than the neon tube. Adjusting the brightness of the LED for comparison to neon, the difference in power consumption is less pronounced.”<sup>220</sup> In other words, LED is more efficient than neon on the surface, but to get the same amount of brightness out of an LED light the power required grows to very close to that of neon. When this relatively even performance efficiency is combined with the clear advantages of neon in terms of recyclable materials and greater longevity, it is clear that neon is the more environmentally friendly choice.

Each of these benefits of neon build upon and influence one another. Artistic neon signs make excellent placemaking tools and become objects of cultural significance that inspire passion in communities and prevent the unnecessary consumption of additional resources for new signs. For these reasons – passion, placemaking, cultural heritage, art, and environmentalism – neon signs are valuable components of the built environment worthy of the cost and effort of crafting regulations, incentives, and advocacy and outreach to preserve them for current and future generations. It is to the state of neon sign preservation in the present, both nationally and locally to Portland, that we turn next.

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219 Thomas Rinaldi notes an early New York sign that dropped from 19,350 to 1,400 kilowatt hours of power used when it converted from incandescents to neon (Rinaldi, *New York Neon*).

220 Evan Gillespie, “How Much Electricity Does a Neon Light Use?” *Hunker*, [www.hunker.com/13412731/how-much-electricity-does-a-neon-light-use](http://www.hunker.com/13412731/how-much-electricity-does-a-neon-light-use) (accessed January 23, 2020).

## CHAPTER 4

### THE CURRENT STATE OF NEON SIGN PROTECTION

*“Life is one big road with lots of signs.”*

*- Bob Marley, “Wake Up and Live”*

This chapter delves deeply into the current state of neon sign preservation at the national, state, and local levels. A sort of “state of the neon sign” address not unlike a State of the Union, it takes the temperature of sign preservation in America today, focusing on the current tools that exist across sectors and levels of government to protect signs. These tools include regulations (often referred to as “sticks”), incentives (often referred to as “carrots”), and advocacy and outreach (the information gathering and marketing that leads to public buy-in). Starting at the national level and working down to the local level in Portland, this chapter identifies not only what is present but what is missing in terms of regulations, incentives, and advocacy and outreach relevant to neon sign preservation. While the focus of the following chapters are case studies and recommendations for how tools can be applied at the local level in Portland to save signs, I believe it is valuable to have a basic understanding of the national and statewide context as well. Therefore, after identifying the state of neon at the national and state levels, I take some time in this chapter to briefly point out holes in the current system and suggest possible remedies. The bulk of the chapter, however, focuses on the state of neon preservation in Portland. Taken as a whole, the chapter presents a baseline for neon preservation in early 2020 and identifies the shortcomings that the case studies and recommendations to follow attempt to address.

#### **A. National Level**

Speaking at the inaugural Neon Speaks conference in San Francisco in 2018, national sign expert Debra Jane Seltzer estimates that there are roughly 10,000 vintage signs left nationwide.<sup>221</sup> Since 2000, roughly 1,000 old neon signs have been lost (about 56 per year). While this is a notable improvement from the days in the 1960s when Portland eliminated 50 neon signs in a single day, Seltzer still estimates

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<sup>221</sup> “Vintage” is not defined, but based on examples generally refers to signs erected from the 1960s and earlier. This number includes all old advertising signs, not just neon.

that at the current rate of disappearance, one-third of the remaining stock of vintage signs could be gone in the next 20 years.<sup>222</sup> During the production of his book on New York neon, Thomas Rinaldi noted multiple instances when the most recent Google Street View image showed a extant sign that had disappeared by the time he got to the sites.

In some instances, these archived Street View images may be the only record that exists of a sign. There is unfortunately no HABS/HAER/HALS equivalent for objects like signs to record them for future scholarship. Business owners often have information handed down on their old signs, but just as often they do not. In many cases, the historical record of signs is simply nonexistent. Identifying the manufacturer and install date of signs proved difficult for Rinaldi, who realized the all-too-common problem of missing or incomplete city records. Despite being important cultural markers and community symbols, neon sign information was for many years just not seen as important enough to record for posterity.

One of the reasons neon continues to disappear today is because of its newest competition: LED lights. LEDs are aggressively marketed by the petro-chemical companies that manufacture them as a “green” alternative to neon that faithfully mimics its look. By 2010, they had overtaken neon in the marketplace. Neighborhoods such as Times Square and the Las Vegas Strip that once overflowed with neon now have very little, almost every inch of glass tubing having been replaced with “neon-like” LED tubes or giant picture screens (also LED).<sup>223</sup> In 2019, LEDs were the top source for electric signs by a longshot, representing 85% of the market, and their share continues to climb. Meanwhile, neon signs have held their own in recent years but represent only 9% of the market, a number that is falling very slowly but falling nonetheless.<sup>224</sup> Figure 47 shows a comparison of illumination for electric signs sold in 2018 and 2019.

Still, there is room for optimism. Notably, 100-200 *in situ* old signs are being conserved each year, showing an appreciation for the relevance these signs continue to have to modern life and the efforts that are being expended to keep them in place.<sup>225</sup> Ironically, it is in some cases their rarity that makes them so valuable. Having been pushed out by the same modernizing forces of progress that originally

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222 Debra Jane Seltzer, “Where Are We? And Where Do We Go from Here?”

223 Rinaldi, *New York Neon*; Isenstadt, Petty, and Neumann, *Cities of Light*.

224 Mark Kissling, “The 2019 State of the Industry Report,” Signs of the Times website, December 9, 2019, [www.signsofthetimes.com/2019StateoftheIndustryReport](http://www.signsofthetimes.com/2019StateoftheIndustryReport) (accessed January 9, 2020).

225 Seltzer, “Where Are We? And Where Do We Go from Here?”

ushered them in, “the old signs stand out today because they represent scarce fragments of a diminished whole: of thousands that once existed, only a few remain. In this sense, their appeal relies on a process that has destroyed the better part of the whole.”<sup>226</sup>

### ***I. National Regulations***

As indicated in Chapter 2, the preservation field has made enormous strides in recent decades in recognizing that old neon signs are worthy of saving. The modern preservation field is built solidly on a framework of federal regulations stemming from the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and is overseen primarily by the NPS. Their tools – including preservation briefs, bulletins, the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), and Section 106 – provide the guidance and legal framework for preservation in America. Within this world, neon is not absent, but it is certainly underrepresented.

The NPS preservation briefs serve as guidelines for how to approach preservation projects. Preservation Brief 17 “Architectural Character – Identifying the Visual Aspects of Historic Buildings as an Aid to Preserving their Character,” is meant to guide practicing preservationists in identifying what elements of an old building are important to preserve in order to maintain their character.<sup>227</sup> While this would be a ripe opportunity to acknowledge the importance of historic signage as a character-defining feature of a building worthy of preservation alongside windows and siding material, signs are completely absent from the 1988 document. Preservation Brief 25 “The Preservation of Historic Signs,” provides a solid tool for those already interested in preserving historic signs but does not provide the encouragement to appreciate them that would come from the inclusion of signs in Brief 17. As discussed earlier, there are also gaps in Brief 25 because of its lack of updates in almost 30 years.

The NRHP represents the single largest system for identifying places worthy of preservation in the United States. This honorific designation is tied to the availability of many federal programs and grant funding; and its systems, language, and ideology is copied for state and local preservation practice across the country. Simply put, recognition of a place on the NRHP is understood as a widely recognized stamp of approval that a place deserves to be preserved. NPS manages the NRHP and has issued a number of bulletins for practitioners to use to evaluate and nominate certain typologies of places to the

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226 Rinaldi, *New York Neon*, 48.

227 Lee H. Nelson, *Preservation Brief 17: Architectural Character – Identifying the Visual Aspects of Historic Buildings as an Aid to Preserving Their Character* (Washington DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service Technical Preservation Services, 1988), [www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/17-architectural-character.htm](http://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/17-architectural-character.htm) (accessed February 1, 2020).

Register. Included in the long and growing list of National Register Bulletins are guides to nominating historic battlefields, cemeteries, post offices, aids to navigation, shipwrecks, and more. However, there is no bulletin legitimizing and thus encouraging nominating signs to the NRHP, nor the federal guidance on how to do so that would accompany it. The result again is that signs are too often not considered when evaluating historic resources worthy of preservation.

The National Register Bulletin, “How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation” is arguably the most important document in modern preservation practice. It forms the guidelines that every NRHP nomination must follow and is drawn upon for state and local historic designation processes nationwide. The guidelines allow for the designation of five different types of places – buildings, structures, objects, sites, and districts. Signs would generally fall into the “objects” category, defined as “those constructions [as opposed to buildings] that are primarily artistic in nature or are relatively small in scale and simply constructed” and associated with a specific setting or environment. The bulletin lists 22 examples of types of buildings, 24 examples of types of structures, 14 examples of types of sites, and a scant 6 examples of types of objects. Notably absent yet again from this list – which includes boundary markers, fountains, mileposts, monuments, sculptures, and statuary – is signs.<sup>228</sup> Not only is the nomination of objects disincentivized through its paltry list of examples, the few examples given do not include signs, which not only fit the description well but have been successfully listed in the NRHP many times as objects.

Table 1 shows the grand total of 16 signs individually listed on the NRHP.<sup>229</sup> This represents roughly 0.02% of the 95,000 places listed and is the natural result of the general lack of recognition described above. Of these 16, six are neon, including one Multiple Property Submission (MPS).<sup>230</sup> Some of this dearth can certainly be attributed to the fact that many historic signs are not standalone objects but instead simply elements of buildings. Unfortunately, there is no good way to determine how many NRHP listings for places that have neon signs include those signs as identified character-defining features in their nominations. The first sign to be added to the NRHP was fairly early, a 1977 listing for the wooden Ash Mountain Entrance Sign to Sequoia National Park. It was not until 11 years later that the first

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228 Patrick W. Andrus, “National Register Bulletin: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service Cultural Resources, 1990, revised 1997), [www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB-15\\_web508.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB-15_web508.pdf) (accessed February 1, 2020).

229 “Signs” for my purposes include individual nominations with the word “sign” in the nomination title. It does not include boundary or mile markers, programmatic architecture, memorials, etc.

230 Represented as one nomination, not multiple. MPSs are different from individual listings and are explained in more detail below.

electric sign was added: the Bristol Virginia-Tennessee Slogan Sign. The sign performs a similar function to today's White Stag Sign, welcoming visitors and reminding residents that their city is "A Good Place to Live." A rare surviving pre-neon spectacular sign, the 1910 sign was saved from the trash heap thanks to a concerted "save our sign" campaign in 1982 and listed on the NRHP in 1988. The 2010 Centennial celebration included cake, music, and public speakers celebrating the importance of this historic community marker. Like many of its neon-lit kin, the original light source (incandescent in this case) was recently replaced with LED.<sup>231</sup>

The first neon sign to be added to the NRHP was Boston's Shell Oil Company Spectacular Sign, in 1994. Notably, the two most recent signs added to the NRHP, in 2016 and 2019, were both neon. A geographic analysis of signs on the NRHP shows the encouraging fact that all regions of the country are represented. There is also one MPS related to neon signs: the 2002 Neon Signs Along Route 66 in New Mexico MPS. MPSs offer an effective way to list thematically-linked properties through the establishment of a historic context. As National Register Districts are linked geographically, MPSs are linked contextually. MPSs do not automatically list all the properties they document (individual nominations must still be completed), but the context they provide makes those nominations a much smoother process. In this case, 27 neon signs along New Mexico's historic Route 66 were listed first as a multiple property listing in the state register, then submitted to the NRHP as an MPS. It does not appear that any of the individual signs referenced in the MPS have been individually added to the NRHP, but the submission nevertheless sets an important precedent for using this unique tool for neon signs in the future. The fact that neon signs are on the NRHP is a small victory, but a victory nonetheless, showing the nation that neon signs are worthy of being individually listed in this important national storehouse of significant places.<sup>232</sup>

The NRHP also offers signs the protection of Section 106 of the NHPA. Section 106 mandates that any undertaking utilizing Federal funding, permitting, approval, licensing, or land ownership must consider the possible effects those actions will have on NRHP-listed or eligible properties; determine if the effects are adverse; and avoid, minimize, or mitigate for them if they are. While the regulation offers

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231 Debra Jane Seltzer, "Scaffold Signs," *SCA Journal*, vol. 37, no. 2 (Fall 2019). Replacing the neon with LED has not prompted the removal of the sign from the NRHP.

232 The United States is not the only country to recognize neon signs with the badge of historic significance. Chile, for example, protects two large neon spectaculars in its historic core as national monuments (Figure 48). Anderson, "How Advertising Conquered Urban Space."



no way to stop adverse effects, it provides a mandate for consultation with interested parties and forces a “stop, look, and listen” approach that requires consideration of possible effects on historic properties.

Section 106 would apply to any neon signs individually listed in or eligible for the NRHP or identified as character-defining features associated with eligible or listed buildings, structures, sites, objects, or districts. Critically, the law applies to properties *eligible* for listing on the NRHP. Federal agencies or entities subject to the regulation are required to work with consulting parties to evaluate all properties within a project’s Area of Potential Effect. Once a potential historic property is identified, it is evaluated using the four NRHP Criteria for Evaluation. For those that meet at least one of the Criteria, the agency/entity must then consider the effect of their undertaking on the historic property. Because we know based on their listing in the NRHP that neon signs can be eligible for listing on the NRHP, federal agencies that may affect potentially significant neon signs *should* be reaching out to organizations such as the Society for Commercial Archeology, local preservation groups, and others with knowledge and expertise in signage and local history to assist with understanding the significance of a sign and then, if it is eligible for the NRHP, avoid, minimize, or mitigate for the effects of their project on those signs. It is beyond the scope of this paper to determine how often this process effectively considers impacts to neon signs. It is logical to conclude, however, that as more and more individuals understand the significance of neon signs, they are more likely to ensure effects on signs are considered during Section 106 review.

An additional legal tool that can be used to protect neon signs is the preservation easement. Preservation easements are legally binding restrictions running with the deed of a property that identify key elements of that property that cannot be altered. They are donated by a property owner, usually to a preservation nonprofit with an endowment for their continued management. Easements provide an effective way for property owners passionate about their signs to ensure their survival in perpetuity. Because they decrease the value of a property, the loss in property value can be used as a tax write-off for the donor. Federal and state tax benefits can accompany easement donations as well. As awareness grows about the value of preserving old neon signs in perpetuity, easements may prove a more-common legal means to do so that does not involve changes to any current legislation. Some of the ways this awareness continues to happen is through incentives and advocacy and outreach.

## ***II. National Incentives***

This section looks at the major national incentive programs that include tax credits, National Trust for Historic Preservation grants, and NPS grants and looks for where they intersect with neon signs (or in too many cases do not). While there are many incentives available for specific locations around the country, my focus in this section is on incentives that could apply to neon signs anywhere in the country.

Arguably the most important federal incentive for preservation is the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Credit. This program provides a 20% tax credit for the rehabilitation of income-producing properties and has helped make countless preservation projects nationwide a financial possibility. This major federal financial incentive for historic preservation projects, however, explicitly excludes signage and is therefore not available for neon signs, standalone or as part of a building rehab project.<sup>233</sup>

The National Trust for Historic Preservation works throughout the United States to promote the values of historic preservation and provide resources and assistance to practitioners. The National Trust has a number of grant programs that could feasibly be used to preserve neon signs, but no program focused exclusively on them.<sup>234</sup> One program that has been used to effectively save neon signs is Partners in Preservation. This partnership program between the National Trust and American Express has provided \$24 million in grants across the U.S. since its inception in 2006. Initial efforts for the annual grant cycle focused on specific cities and more recently on National Parks. Since 2017, the program has focused on communities participating in the National Trust's Main Street downtown economic revitalization program. It was through this program, voted on by the public nationwide, that Casa Grande received \$144,000 to establish their neon sign park. The story of the sign park grant is so popular that, despite being a few years old, it is currently the only featured story on the grant website that is not a recap of an entire grant cycle or large-scale impact report.<sup>235</sup> The fact that it is the only individual grant to be featured on the page is testament to the widespread interest in neon signs and can be a motivation to others seeking to use this grant program to similarly protect neon signs.

The Johanna Favrot Fund for Historic Preservation is given by the National Trust to “save historic environments in order to foster an appreciation of our nation’s diverse cultural heritage and to preserve and revitalize the livability of the nation’s communities.” These \$2,500-\$15,000 grants are available to public agencies, nonprofits, or Main Street communities and require a 50% match by the

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233 Mark Primoli, “IRS Frequently Asked Questions,” National Park Service Technical Preservation Services website, October 2000, [www.nps.gov/tps/tax-incentives/before-apply/irs-faq2.htm](http://www.nps.gov/tps/tax-incentives/before-apply/irs-faq2.htm) (accessed February 1, 2020).

234 This was the case universally. Aside from some local examples, there are no large-scale incentive programs from any source geared specifically toward neon sign preservation.

235 “Partners in Preservation,” National Trust for Historic Preservation website, <https://savingplaces.org/partners-in-preservation> (accessed February 1, 2020).

recipient. While a list of past recipients of this grant was not available, the grant requirements appear to be amenable to neon signs.<sup>236</sup>

A final National Trust grant program is also available nationwide but is limited to signs that are within designated Main Street communities. The NPS Main Street Façade Improvement Grant is actually a result of a grant from the NPS received by Main Street America that it is redistributing. The program was just launched this year and provides up to \$25,000 to façade improvement projects in communities of 50,000 people or less. Properties must be listed in or eligible for the NRHP, and recipients must provide a 30% match.<sup>237</sup> Façade improvement grants like this are natural fits for neon sign conservation since neon signs are often part of a building's façade. While removing mid-century additions to building facades such as neon signs was once celebrated as façade improvement (since they were considered outside many properties' period of significance), these kinds of actions are generally discouraged in modern preservation practice through documents such as Preservation Brief 25.

The NPS program that is funding the Main Street Façade Improvement Grant is the Paul Bruhn Historic Revitalization Grant. Available to State and Tribal Historic Preservation Offices, Certified Local Governments (CLGs), or nonprofits to redistribute, awards range from \$100,000-\$750,000.<sup>238</sup> It is feasible that the SHPO or a nonprofit could create a program to redistribute these funds specifically for neon sign conservation.

Finally, the Save America's Treasures Grant awards up to \$500,000 for preservation projects or museums preserving nationally significant collections. Importantly, the grant language explicitly notes that objects (not just buildings) are eligible for funding, so this fund could be applied to the preservation of a building and its neon sign or the development or upkeep of a museum's nationally-significant neon sign collection. Preservation projects must be for places listed as nationally significant in the NRHP or as National Historic Landmarks or as part of nationally significant districts. At this time, none of the six

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236 "Johanna Favrot Fund for Historic Preservation: Guidelines & Eligibility," National Trust for Historic Preservation: Preservation Leadership Forum website, <https://forum.savingplaces.org/build/funding/grant-seekers/specialprograms/favrot-fund> (accessed February 1, 2020). Unfortunately, the current state of affairs is that not specifically excluding signage is about as close as you can get to actively encouraging neon sign preservation in grant language. Exceptions to this are at the local level and are discussed in Chapter 5. The difficulty of easy public access to what projects have received grants in the past is also a concern among the other grant programs discussed in this section.

237 "NPS Main Street Façade Improvement Grant," Main Street America website, [www.mainstreet.org/ourwork/projectspotlight/facadeimprovements/npsgrant](http://www.mainstreet.org/ourwork/projectspotlight/facadeimprovements/npsgrant) (accessed February 6, 2020).

238 National Park Service, State, Tribal, and Local Plans and Grants Division, "Paul Bruhn Historic Revitalization Grants Program," January 17, 2020, [www.nps.gov/orgs/1623/historic-revitalization-subgrant-program.htm](http://www.nps.gov/orgs/1623/historic-revitalization-subgrant-program.htm) (accessed February 1, 2020).

individually listed neon signs on the NRHP are listed for national significance and would therefore not be eligible, but there could be buildings that contain neon that are.<sup>239</sup>

Thus, while there are incentives at the national level that have been used to protect neon signs, they generally require creativity on the part of the applicant and are limited in their applicability. None of the available incentives specifically encourage neon sign preservation. One notable exception, the Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program Cost-Share Grant, recently sunset but is discussed at length in Chapter 5.

### ***III. National Advocacy and Outreach***

While there is no national nonprofit dedicated solely to sign preservation, there is nonetheless meaningful work being done nationwide to promote the value of neon signs. Many of the leading organizations have been mentioned previously, but the largest players are the Society for Commercial Archeology, San Francisco Neon, and Signs United. The Society for Commercial Archeology prominently features neon signs on its annual regional tours and conferences as well as in its publications. It has submitted letters in support for local sign preservation efforts and for many years provided effective public relations fuel for local organizations by listing signs on its now-defunct Falling by the Wayside list of endangered places.

San Francisco Neon, while centered on its namesake city, has become the closest thing to a national neon preservation nonprofit by way of its new Neon Speaks conference. Entering its third year in 2020, the conference brings together neon practitioners, preservationists, and enthusiasts from across the country and world. Its recently published *Saving Neon* booklet is also the only non-academic publication exclusively dedicated to best practices in neon preservation.

Signs United is a network of neon advocates who promote neon through their website and social media presence. They are differentiated from the myriad other neon-focused social media accounts by their national scope, wide network of neon experts, occasional in-person events, and ability to unite as a mobilized force with resources and high-level advocacy when a member raises a concern about an endangered sign. In this way, they are a powerful force for pooling resources in support of signs nationwide.

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239 National Park Service, State, Tribal, and Local Plans and Grants Division, “Save America’s Treasures Grants,” [www.nps.gov/preservation-grants/sat/index.html](http://www.nps.gov/preservation-grants/sat/index.html) (accessed February 1, 2020).

Finally, the many social media accounts and Flickr pages of neon-loving individuals, artists, and their galleries and webpages should not be discounted. In reaching the general public, the worlds of art, nostalgia, and fandom are powerful tools, and the number of individuals using online platforms and fine art to bring attention to the beauty of neon signs are seemingly endless.

#### ***IV. National Neon Sign Preservation Issues and Recommendations***

- **Issue:** “Preservation Brief 17: Architectural Character – Identifying the Visual Aspects of Historic Buildings as an Aid to Preserving their Character” does not mention signage as a possible character-defining feature of a building.

**Recommendation:** Update this document to incorporate signage. Signs on buildings could be included in the Overall Visual Aspects section along with Shape, Openings, Roof, Roof-Related Features, Projections (porches), and Trim as another important element to consider. Standalone signs could be incorporated in the Setting section. Neon could also be highlighted in the Visual Character at Close Range: Materials section as a material to look out for.

- **Issue:** “Preservation Brief 25: The Preservation of Historic Signs” does not address the question of whether LED lights are an appropriate substitute for neon tubes in an existing historic sign.

**Recommendation:** Update this document to address the rise of LED as a competitor to neon. This will provide guidance for preservationists seeking Federally sanctioned guidelines on best practices.

- **Issue:** There is no National Register Bulletin addressing how to evaluate and nominate sign to the NRHP.

**Recommendation:** Create a National Register Bulletin for signs. This will legitimize and encourage more NRHP nominations of signs.

- **Issue:** The National Register Bulletin “How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation” does not list signs as an example when describing “objects” that can be nominated to the NRHP.

**Recommendation:** Add signs to the list of object examples.

- **Issue:** The Section 106 process may not always consider the effect of undertakings on potentially significant vintage signs.

Recommendation: This fix requires the slow but steady churn of cultural change. As signs are more regularly seen as culturally significant, Section 106 participants and consulting SHPOs will be more likely to acknowledge them during the review process, and sign advocacy organizations are more likely to be invited as parties to consultation. One way this could play out is with major public transportation projects. It is reasonably foreseeable, for example, that adding a light rail line to an existing street will increase development pressure on that street and endanger nearby existing low-density properties. In fact, zoning codes are often re-written when rail is added to encourage high-density development near the stations, increasing the value of the land and incentivizing owners of low-density properties to sell. Whenever these projects happen, agencies should address the indirect cumulative effect of increased development along the route on existing signs. If a two-story motel with a significant sign is near a new transit stop, it is reasonable to believe that that parcel may be redeveloped for higher density uses and the sign endangered. The Section 106 process should address this reasonably foreseeable effect to a historic property through avoidance, minimization, or mitigation.

- Issue: Federal Historic Preservation Tax Credits cannot be used for the preservation of significant signs.

Recommendation: The sign exclusion should be removed from the tax credit regulation. If signs can be listed on the NRHP the same as buildings and identified as character-defining features of listed buildings, then tax credits should be able to be used to preserve signs along with other character-defining elements of a building.

- Issue: There are no national grant programs focused on neon signs.

Recommendation: The National Trust or National Park Service should be a leader in recognizing the significance of neon signs by offering a grant dedicated to the preservation of our nation's historic signage.

- Issue: There is no national nonprofit providing a unified voice for historic sign preservation in America.

Recommendation: National nonprofits dedicated to specific typologies such as historic theaters or amusement parks already exist and set an important precedent. A national nonprofit dedicated to old signs should be created.

## **B. State Level**

Oregon's current system of preservation practice is considered by some to be "worst practice" in the U.S.<sup>240</sup> This is due to a law requiring owner consent for the designation of cultural resources. U.S. law delegates land use decisions to the state and local level, and in every other state there is a process for local communities and property owners to work together to designate and protect, through regulation, places that are historically or culturally significant. However, Oregon's 1990s-era owner consent law, the only state law like it in the nation, shifts the balance of power for land use decisions away from a collaborative process and gives property owners significantly more power than in other states. As a result, there has been a reluctance to create preservation programs, such as local or state designations or historic resource surveys, that form the basis of preservation practice in many other states. In addition, until recently, National Register listing of properties (which is ultimately decided at the Federal level) has sometimes been tied directly to local land use regulations without any separate public designation process (as had been the case in Portland up to 2017). While advocates continue to push state legislators to reconsider how preservation is practiced in Oregon, owner consent remains the law in 2020 and makes the state an outlier in the preservation world.

Despite this situation, neon has done fairly well in Oregon. Debra Jane Seltzer reports that Oregon ranks 11<sup>th</sup> nationwide for the number of extant vintage signs at 146 (Figure 49). She notes that only 13 signs have been lost since 2000.<sup>241</sup> These numbers show that, despite what may be a handicap in the form of weak preservation laws and no dedicated sign preservation programs, Oregon has managed to maintain a relatively high percentage of its vintage signs.

### ***I. State Regulations***

There are few current tools for preserving neon signs at the state level in Oregon, as much of the work done at the state level of preservation practice in America is a go-between connecting Federal policies and programs to local communities. On the regulatory end, the state historic preservation office (SHPO) is the state-level equivalent of the NPS, offering preservation programs and grants, and applying regulations statewide. Unlike some states (California, Virginia, New Hampshire, and more), Oregon does not have a state historic register or landmark designation process, thus there are no guidelines for

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240 Restore Oregon website, <https://restoreoregon.org> (accessed February 12, 2020)..

241 It should be noted that Seltzer, while compiling the most extensive list of vintage signs in the country, cannot know about every single old sign. Only 13 losses is laudable but should not be taken to mean that work cannot still be done to bring the number to zero and preserve the small neighborhood signs that often fly under the radar.

designating important places at the state level. SHPO does provide some guidance for preservation practitioners in the form of the “Guidelines for Historic Resource Surveys in Oregon.” Historic resource surveys are important tools for communities to systematically identify what kinds of historically or culturally significant places exist within their borders. The end result can inform future strategic planning, preservation, and land use decisions and provide avenues for community revitalization built around cultural resources. Oregon’s survey guidelines are currently being re-written and are not yet publicly available, but the existing version, written in 2011, includes no mention of signage except to note that street signs should not be recorded in Reconnaissance Level Surveys.<sup>242</sup> This is a missed opportunity to acknowledge the historic and cultural value old signs can have by reminding those engaged in creating Reconnaissance and Intensive Level Surveys around the state to consider signs as potentially character-defining elements of surveyed properties or as significant in their own right.

Oregon also has a state-level policy that bears some resemblance to the federal Section 106 process. Oregon Revised Statute 358.653 statute states: “Any state agency or political subdivision responsible for real property of historic significance in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer shall institute a program to conserve the property and assure that such a property shall not be inadvertently transferred, sold, demolished, substantially altered or allowed to deteriorate.” The specific language could be interpreted in different ways, but there are no clarifying administrative rules, so for practical purposes SHPO treats the statute as a Section 106 “lite.” While just being permitted by a federal entity is enough for a project to trigger Section 106 review for all potentially affected properties, 358.653 is only triggered for properties for which state agencies or political subdivisions (state and local governments, schools, etc.) are responsible (usually interpreted as meaning they own the property). Similar to Section 106, the law applies only to places with historic significance (interpreted to mean eligible for or listed in the NRHP). As a matter of course, all undertakings involving a state agency or political subdivision-owned property over 50 years old must go through review. As there are few neon signs owned by these entities in Oregon, 358.653 does not protect many neon signs, but it does offer a valuable check for those few that are. For example, if the City of Portland attempted to sell the iconic White Stag sign, it would have to consult with SHPO and first explore options for avoiding and then mitigating negative impacts to the sign’s historic integrity caused by the sale.

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242 State of Oregon, Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, “Guidelines for Historic Resource Surveys in Oregon,” 2011, [www.oregon.gov/oprd/OH/pages/survey.aspx](http://www.oregon.gov/oprd/OH/pages/survey.aspx) (accessed February 19, 2020).



## *II. State Incentives*

Thirty-seven states currently provide state historic preservation tax credits akin to those offered at the national level. Oregon, however, is one of the 13 that do not; but it does have the Special Assessment. The Special Assessment program, renewed in 2019 to continue through 2022, allows property owners who meet certain conditions to make preservation improvements to their property without being assessed the taxes on the value of those improvements during a 10-year benefit period. In other words, if a property is worth \$400,000 and preservation improvements add \$100,000 of value, the owner would not be taxed on that additional \$100,000 for 10 years. Requirements include listing on the NRHP (this can be done within two years of enrolling in the program), creating a preservation plan, following the SOI Standards for all work performed, and minimum spending requirements.<sup>243</sup> While it is unlikely that this program would be used for a standalone sign, it could allow a property owner who is rehabilitating their property to include their neon sign in the rehabilitation work without being taxed on the extra value the fixed sign added to the property value. While not a tax credit, the Special Assessment does offer the possibility of adding some economic value to the preservation of an old neon sign.

Additional incentives that could be used to preserve neon signs are available through the SHPO as well. The Diamonds in the Rough Grant provides up to \$20,000 to restore or reconstruct the façade of a heavily altered building. The matching grant could be used to restore a dilapidated old neon sign that is part of a larger façade restoration project. The Preserving Oregon grant also provides up to \$20,000. Properties must be listed in the NRHP, and preference is given to nonprofit or public owners for structural upgrade projects. This could include work on neon signs if they are called out as character-defining features in the NRHP nomination.

The Oregon Main Street Network provides potential benefits as well. Projects within designated Main Street districts can receive up to \$200,000 for a wide range of projects, not excluding sign conservation, that facilitate community revitalization. The Main Street approach itself, focusing on economic development through historic preservation, can have beneficial effects on neon signs that are seen as valuable.<sup>244</sup> Chapter 2 described some of the dangers of whitewashing a building's history that had been employed as part of the Main Street approach in the past, however. It is thus important that the

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<sup>243</sup> State of Oregon, Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, "Tax Incentives," [www.oregon.gov/oprd/OH/pages/tax-incentives.aspx](http://www.oregon.gov/oprd/OH/pages/tax-incentives.aspx) (accessed February 20, 2020).

<sup>244</sup> State of Oregon, "Grants," Oregon State Historic Preservation Office website, [www.oregon.gov/oprd/HCD/FINASST/Pages/grants.aspx](http://www.oregon.gov/oprd/HCD/FINASST/Pages/grants.aspx) (accessed February 6, 2020).

cultural significance and economic value of neon signs continues to be recognized so Main Street communities harness the development tools available to them for the preservation rather than removal of neon.

The CLG program involves federal money that is distributed to local governments, but it is managed by the state. The CLG program recognizes those local governments that commit to protecting their historic resources with non-competitive grant money. There are currently 51 CLGs in Oregon, including Portland, which receive up to \$11,500 bi-annually that can be used for a broad range of preservation activities.<sup>245</sup> Historic resource surveys, historic contexts, NRHP nominations, public education, planning, and bricks and mortar work for NRHP-listed properties are just some of the ways that CLG grants can be spent. Any of these avenues could help preserve or foster a culture of appreciation for neon signs, making CLG grants a valuable tool Oregon municipalities could use for neon preservation. While these preservation incentive opportunities for neon are not extensive, they do represent important state-level support that could be used to help preserve neon signs.

### ***III. State Advocacy and Outreach***

State-level advocacy and outreach for neon sign preservation does not exist in any real way. While it is feasible that a state-wide nonprofit could exist focused on neon signs, these kinds of typology-focused organizations or advocates tend to operate at the national or local levels. Oregon does have a vibrant, active statewide preservation nonprofit, Restore Oregon, but the organization does not have any programs touching on neon signs. Financial and staff capacity are always limited for any nonprofit, and hard decisions must be made about where to allocate resources. Restore Oregon is active in advocating for preservation-friendly legislation related to tax credits, owner consent, and compatible infill development; is working to find a viable home for a historic carousel; manages an easement program; develops starter toolkits on preservation processes; manages a Most Endangered Places list; and hosts fundraisers. There is precedent for the organization to focus on specific typologies like neon signs, as current programs focus on barns, theaters, and mid-century homes, but thus far the organization has been silent on neon. Given the organization's current emphasis on preservation as an economic driver, environmentally-friendly option, and means to preserve the stories of underserved communities, there is certainly a good fit for a dedicated neon program. Restore Oregon's vision to "preserve, reuse, and pass

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245 Kuri Gill, "Certified Local Governments," Oregon State Historic Preservation Office website, [www.oregon.gov/oprd/HCD/SHPO/pages/clg.aspx](http://www.oregon.gov/oprd/HCD/SHPO/pages/clg.aspx) (accessed February 6, 2020).

forward the places that reflect Oregon’s diverse cultural heritage and make our communities vibrant, livable, and sustainable” lends itself to a kinship with neon, and many of the local advocacy and outreach suggestions that follow in Chapter 6 would apply just as easily to this statewide organization.<sup>246</sup>

#### ***IV. State Neon Sign Preservation Issues and Recommendations***

- Issue: Oregon SHPO survey guidelines do not mention signage as features to evaluate during reconnaissance or intensive level historic resource surveys. Thus, it would be easy to overlook signs when conducting a survey.

Recommendation: New guidelines should include a reminder to surveyors to note when signs are character-defining features of properties, whether they are part of the building itself or the property’s landscape.

- Issue: Oregon is one of only handful of states not to offer a state historic preservation tax credit.

Recommendation: Oregon should create a historic preservation tax credit and ensure that it does not exclude signage. A bill to create a state tax credit was introduced in 2019 but was unsuccessful.<sup>247</sup>

### **C. Local Level**

We turn now to Portland, applying the same systematic approach used for the state and national levels: examining the local regulations, incentives, and advocacy and outreach affecting the preservation of Portland’s neon sign stock. While issues with the current available protections are identified, recommendations for the local level are offered in Chapter 6, after best practices from around the country have first been examined.

#### ***I. Local Regulations***

The most complex and most common form of historic resource protection in the United States is also the most prescriptive. State enabling laws allow localities the flexibility to regulate certain resources, governing what can and cannot be done to them. It is the system of rules that govern what is allowed to exist in the built environment, and it is both a blessing and curse to the protection of neon signs. In

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<sup>246</sup> Restore Oregon website.

<sup>247</sup> SB 929, the Preservation, Housing, and Seismic Safety Act, would have provided a 25% credit for qualified rehabilitation costs for historic buildings, or 35% for seismic upgrades.

Portland, regulations generally fall into four interrelated categories: historic resource protections, city code language, design guidelines, and planning documents. What follows attempts to outline the most important elements of local regulations as they relate to neon signs and examines the city's only existing program focused exclusively on the protection of neon signs, the North Interstate Neon Sign District.

*a. Historic Resource Protections*

Historic resource protections are those regulations written into the city code that govern places that have been inventoried or designated as “historic.” Portland employs a tiered system of historic resource protections with different regulations employed in different situations based on how a resource was inventoried and/or designated and its level of significance. Those levels are: NRHP individual and district listings, local historic landmarks and districts, local conservation landmarks and districts, and ranked HRI properties. Currently, each of these levels requires a form of owner consent before a property can be listed.<sup>248</sup> This information, however, may change in the near future, as the city is currently working on re-writing its historic resources code. Thus, this section explains both the current code and proposed changes as they exist in the Historic Resources Code Project's Discussion Draft. Current historic resource protections are as follows:<sup>249</sup>

NRHP – NRHP listing offers the only “protection” in the most literal sense of the word available to a property in Portland. Only with NRHP listing is there a mechanism to stop the demolition of a historic resource. The city's Historic Landmarks Commission reviews all demolition requests for NRHP-listed properties, and makes a recommendation to City Council, which must vote to allow demolition. A sign that is listed individually (of which there are none in Portland) or as contributing to a district would have this protection. Unfortunately, the removal of a character-defining historic sign from a listed building would not necessarily be considered a demolition under the usual interpretation of the regulation and may not trigger demolition review. If a property was listed prior to February 2017, most proposed changes must go through Historic Resource Review (HRR).<sup>250</sup> Because alterations must go through this review process, if a neon sign was noted as a character-defining feature of a listed property, the review could stop the

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248 A brief note on terminology: whenever I use the term “listed,” I am referring to a property that is either individually listed on a historic resource register or listed as contributing to a designated district. Inclusion on the HRI is not considered an official listing, but owners can currently request their properties be removed from the HRI, giving the process a form of owner consent.

249 All information in this section comes from City of Portland, Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, “Historic Resources and Preservation,” <https://portland.gov/historic-resources> (accessed February 12, 2020).

250 Historic Resource Review is described in more detail in the following section on code language.

inappropriate alteration of the sign.<sup>251</sup> If a property was listed after February 2017, it must first go through a local public process to be designated locally before HRR applies. Other protections afforded to NRHP-listed or eligible properties are those of Section 106 and ORS 358.653, which require certain kinds of undertakings to consider their effects on historic resources.<sup>252</sup> This would apply to signs listed on or eligible for the NRHP as well as signs mentioned as character-defining features of buildings that are listed or eligible. Finally, NRHP listing opens up numerous grant opportunities only open to listed properties.

Local Historic Landmarks/Districts – Currently very few local landmarks exist (though the White Stag Sign is one them) and no local historic districts exist, but regulations do allow for them. Listed properties with these designations are subject to a 120-day demolition delay. This provides an opportunity for preservation advocates to find alternatives to demolition (such as relocation, an option that is more likely with a sign than with a building) but does not provide any recourse to stop the demolition after the 120-day delay expires. In addition, alterations are subject to HRR (regardless of when the property was listed).

Local Conservation Landmarks/Districts – Conservation landmarks and districts are often referred to as historic landmarks/districts “lite.” They are a way to offer some recognition of places that are significant but may not warrant the same level of protection as their “historic” counterparts. Portland conservation landmarks enjoy the same 120-day demolition delay and HRR requirements as historic landmarks/districts, but projects in all conservation districts as well as conservation landmarks either in the Albina neighborhood or outside the Central City are able to meet objective Community Design Standards (CDS) instead of going through HRR. This can sometimes save a property owner time and money. There is no CDS for signs, however. The CDS code section (33.218.140) governing the criteria for conservation landmarks/districts does not list signs as a feature that must be retained. While it is natural that objective criteria would not necessitate saving every sign, the system of objective standards does not allow for concepts like encouragement. The result is that there is no way for the CDS to incentivize saving

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251 The regulations do limit the necessity to go through this process to signs under 150 sq. ft. and within certain zones, but larger signs would usually require a variance for changes, which would trigger HRR anyway.

252 ORS 358.653 only applies to property for which a state agency or political subdivision of the state is responsible.

important signs, and conservation area signs that are able to use CDS are functionally without protection (except for the demolition delay).

HRI ranked – Portland conducted its last Historic Resource Inventory in 1984, during which it assigned inventoried properties a ranking based on perceived historic significance and integrity. This inventory covered the Central City area but not parts of the city that were farther afield (or that were not part of the city then but are now). In addition, because properties generally needed to be 50 years old to be ranked, potentially historic resources built after 1934 were rarely included. Those resources that are ranked in the HRI are currently subject to a 120-day demolition delay, but property owners may request removal of their property from the inventory.

The regulations noted above could change in the near future, however. Portland is currently working on its first update to the Historic Resources code since 2013, largely in response to a 2016 Oregon Supreme Court decision and new state administrative rules regarding historic resources. The proposed updates for Portland focus on the process of updating the HRI, creating new procedures for designating new local historic/conservation landmarks/districts, revising owner consent requirements, and revising protections. Notably, the first photo used in the current Discussion Draft Summary of the proposed changes is the enormous Palms Motel neon sign. This inclusion is a subtle but telling recognition that neon signs can be historic resources. The proposed changes at the time of this paper's writing are relatively friendly to neon signs. They are:<sup>253</sup>

NRHP – Already-listed properties would retain the same level of protection, but future NRHP-listed properties would maintain their current demolition review but have the current HRR removed. While this does remove a key protection to these resources, especially considering the high threshold needed to initiate demolition review, it does closer match preservation practice nationwide. The concurrent strengthening of local designations and creation of a community-focused process that accompanies this change could make up for the loss of protections for the NRHP-listed properties.

Local Historic Landmarks/Districts – Under the proposed changes, these properties would require demolition review (instead of the current demolition delay) and keep current HRR protection.

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253 City of Portland, Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, "Historic Resources Code Project," <https://portland.gov/bps/hrcp> (accessed February 12, 2020).

Type IV review would be required for main structures on a property (giving the reviewer the power to stop demolition) and Type II review required for accessory structures.<sup>254</sup> Signs could be considered accessory structures under this language; however, the changes also specify that all signs that are part of historic landmarks/districts would go through Type I review (currently signs could require a Type Ix, II, or III review).<sup>255</sup> This simplifies and may speed up the process and lower the cost for sign review, but it also puts signs in a different class than buildings.

Local Conservation Landmarks/Districts – Under the proposed changes, these properties would also require demolition review (instead of the current 120-day demolition delay) and keep the current HRR protection system with options for CDS. Type II review would be required for main structures, but no review would be required for accessory structures. Like with historic landmarks/districts, signs would require Type I review (providing a level of review for signs that might otherwise be classified as accessory structures and have no review). The Discussion Draft commentary on proposed changes to 22.445.810 “When Community Design Standards May Be Used” puts forth the examples of a conservation district of signs as an example of a situation where district rules could be different to allow more leniency on building protections because they would not affect the integrity of the signs the district was created to protect. This is another important recognition of the potential significance of signs and provides a precedent for the creation of such a district and the ability to tweak code language for special situations.

HRI ranked – No changes are proposed, other than a property owner would no longer be able to request removal of their property from the HRI. This positive change would ensure that HRI ranked resources could not lose their 120-day demolition delay protection. It would close the current loophole allowing an owner of an HRI ranked property who wants to demolish their property to simply request removal of the property from the inventory and avoid the demolition delay.

As they relate to signs, these regulations would apply to signs that are individually listed or HRI ranked or that are contributing to a district. Because preservation practice protects those elements of

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<sup>254</sup> These review types are explained in more detail in the following section on code language.

<sup>255</sup> Current rules assign signs in C, E, I, RX, and CI zones < 150 sq. ft. to Type Ix review. Signs that don't meet those criteria and are part of a project < \$459,450 use Type II review. If the sign doesn't meet the Ix criteria and is part of a historic landmark or district and part of a project > \$459,450, it uses Type III review.

properties that convey its significance (character-defining features), signs would also be protected if they are mentioned in historic resource nominations as character defining. A complete review of all the potentially-significant neon signs in Portland to determine what kind of protection they have is outside the scope of this paper, but a sample was chosen of some signs known to have a level of protection or that are mentioned elsewhere in this paper. To determine these protections, I reviewed the properties' Historic Resource Protections on PortlandMaps, which also provides access to nominations, which were reviewed for mention of signs.<sup>256</sup> The results are in Table 2. Of the seven signs examined, four are not noted in any context.

I also performed a search for objects and signs on Oregon Historic Sites Database (OHSD) to determine if there were any additional listed signs in Portland. Of note is the fact that the White Stag Sign is one of only nine objects in the entire county that are listed on the NRHP and the only sign (though it is noted as being out-of-period to the surrounding listed district and does not enjoy NRHP protections as a result). A search on the OHSD for "signs" in Portland reveals 10 results. All but the White Stag Sign are the results of inventories and have no protection. Only the Palms and Westerner Motel neon signs, and Eastern Outfitting Co. (a sign carved into a downtown sidewalk) remain unaltered today. The OHSD does not list properties on local registries. It is important to note that signs *can* be designated as landmarks in Portland, however (as the White Stag sign is), and this is codified in the Planning and Zoning Code.<sup>257</sup> This brief overview shows that, aside from some notable exceptions, signs have not traditionally been recognized with historic resource protections in Portland, and no inventory specific to signs has been conducted.

#### 1. Local Historic Resource Protection Issues

- Portland's HRI is 36 years old and woefully out of date. Entire neighborhoods, especially those farther from the city center that represent population centers for traditionally underserved communities, are not present in the existing survey. In addition, resources that have been built after the mid-1930s are also not well represented. This situation leaves a number of potentially significant neon signs unaccounted for. An understanding of the potential for neon signs to be

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<sup>256</sup> City of Portland, Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, "Historic Resources," Portland Maps website, <https://pdx.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=9b7e5b99790d44608d440f6bce15451f> (accessed February 12, 2020).

<sup>257</sup> Title 33.910.



historically significant was not common at the time, and thus even buildings that are ranked often do not mention signage in the documentation (as is the case for the Portland Outdoor Store).

- The City traditionally has a high threshold for determining what constitutes demolition. This interpretation would likely not include removal of large character-defining signs connected with protected buildings. Thus, demolition review or delay that could protect signs connected with listed buildings may not kick in unless a complete demolition of the property is proposed.
- While CDS allows for property owners to save time and money by skipping HRR, there is no mechanism within the current system to protect signs, leaving signs in conservation landmarks/districts essentially with limited protection. The CDS makes sense for the historic landmark/district “lite” model of conservation landmarks/districts that does not have as many protections, but it fails to offer enough protection to signs in its current form.
- Proposed changes to the HRR level for signs are a mixed bag. While speeding up the process, saving owners money, and providing some protection to otherwise unprotected signs in conservation districts, it also sets up a system where signs may not enjoy the same level of protection as buildings. All review types follow the same guidelines, but the review type assigned to signs involves the public less, provides no ability to stop demolition under any circumstance, and is handled by staff rather than a commission. While staff follow the same guidelines, there is still a danger of interpretation of the guidelines unfriendly to signs that is potentially lessened by the diversity of opinions inherent in the commission-decision process of other review types.
- Portland has not done a specific inventory of potentially significant signs. Those signs that do have a measure of protection get that protection from a hodgepodge of designations. Without a specific way to call out significant signs, the city does not have a good mechanism for understanding the significance of its neon sign stock and offering the appropriate historic resource protections to those signs.

#### *b. City Code Language*

Codes provide the regulatory framework that allows a city to function. Any authority a city has for regulating the built environment only exists if it is written in the code. Therefore, a conversation about how regulations impact neon signs must include a thorough analysis of the code language. As

described in Chapter 2, city codes have also played a significant role in the loss of neon signs over the years. In many cities, they still do. As Debra Jane Seltzer notes:

*Most cities have laws that prohibit vintage signs from being removed and reinstalled. These grandfathered signs can only be repaired or repainted while they are in place. That makes a thorough restoration nearly impossible. In some cases, city variances can be obtained that permit the sign's owner to have the work done off-site. However, most small business owners have neither the money for a full restoration nor the interest in dealing with the city's bureaucracy. It's much cheaper and easier to replace the sign with a modern backlit plastic box.*<sup>258</sup>

At its best, this kind of code language disincentivizes neon sign preservation; at its worst, it makes effective maintenance illegal. Where signs are allowed to be fixed, the time and money necessary to complete the process can be burdensome to small business owners. Some cities go even further by mandating that nonconforming signs have to be removed within a certain amount of time after new code language takes effect.<sup>259</sup> Many of the signs that are most iconic and beloved would be illegal to erect today because they do not conform to current code language. Neon artist Rudi Stern hoped in 1988 that “city planners may one day recognize the value of neon as an element of urban vitality.”<sup>260</sup> This section analyzes the code language in Portland that effects neon signs to determine if that “one day” has arrived in the City of Roses.

Various parts of the city code affect neon signs. The Building Code, for example, notes that work not covered by a building permit for maintenance of buildings in an area with parking meters cannot close off any area of the sidewalk or street without obtaining a street use permit.<sup>261</sup> This could have the effect of making it difficult or expensive to properly maintain certain signs. The Electrical Code notes that all existing electrical installations must be maintained in a safe condition.<sup>262</sup> While this is certainly reasonable, it also allows old signs to be condemned and removed and was a common rationale for removing signs around the country in the past. Much of the information on the processes and protections

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258 Debra Jane Seltzer, *Vintage Signs of America* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing, 2017), 91.

259 Kramer, “Preserving Historic Signs in the Commercial Landscape.”

260 Stern, *The New Let There Be Neon*, 33.

261 Title 24.40.010.

262 Title 26.03.100.

for signs that are historic resources or otherwise specially zoned are part of the Zoning Code, which is footnoted throughout this chapter as Title 33.

The most pertinent section of code for signs is the Sign Code (Title 32). Portland's Sign Code is currently undergoing revisions, but unfortunately those revisions were not yet publicly available at the time of my research. Thus, this section describes the code as it exists in early 2020. It is my hope that some of the suggestions generated in this paper might influence the new code before it is finalized. As it stands, however, Portland's Sign Code generally avoids much of the language described above that caused the loss of so many neon signs in the past and creates a regulatory environment that is generally friendly to neon signs. It is not, however, without room for improvement.<sup>263</sup>

The sign code lays out standards for allowable signs based on location, size, illumination, and other characteristics.<sup>264</sup> Signs that meet these requirements are conforming and include many neon signs around the city. Some characteristics that might make a sign nonconforming are that they are: too big; on a rooftop; or too close to bridges and too large, with a changing image, or freestanding. If the sign extends too far into the right-of-way; features too much changing image; extends too far above a roof; is freestanding and not within a setback, or is illegal in its plan district, it would also be nonconforming.<sup>265</sup> Finally, being within a vision clearance area, too low above a sidewalk, or too close to a power conductor would also result in a nonconforming status.<sup>266</sup> The code also provides an allowance for legal nonconforming signs that are vested (existed before new code language was put into place) or have received a variance allowing them to exist despite not conforming to the code. This is the status of many of the city's most iconic signs.

Many cities have a clause requiring nonconforming signs to come into conformity within a set amount of time. Portland mercifully avoids this egregious anti-historic sign error. Further, while signs must be kept in a safe condition or the City can order their removal, there is no requirement for them to

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263 Information in this section comes from conversations with my terminal project committee member Hillary Adam, from Portland's Bureau of Development Services, and "Charter, Code and Policies," City of Portland website, [www.portlandoregon.gov/citycode/28148](http://www.portlandoregon.gov/citycode/28148) (accessed February 13, 2020).

264 Note that Title 32.12.020 exempts indoor signs from sign code regulations unless they are illuminated and in residential areas. This explains the proliferation of neon signs behind glass storefronts, which have become common in recent years.

While this is an important avenue for neon today, it does limit the size of signs to those which can fit in a storefront and provides limited visibility compared to exterior signs. Also exempt is public art. This exemption provides an excellent avenue should Portland find value in creating a neon sign park. Classifying these signs as public art would allow much more flexibility in placing them.

265 Title 32.32.020.

266 Title 32.42.

stay illuminated, and enforcement of sign safety issues is largely driven by complaints.<sup>267</sup> This ensures that important old signs can continue to exist legally, even if the business they advertise no longer does.

Another major stumbling block for the continued existence of old nonconforming neon signs in many cities is their inability to be repaired or altered in any way without becoming illegal. This often hinges on definitions of what counts as a “new” sign. It is detrimental to sign preservation if code language says that a sign with legal nonconforming status that needs to be repaired in a shop loses its vested status the moment it is removed from a building and must be considered “new” if it is to go back up following repair. In this area, Portland also shows a commendable understanding of the need to allow for maintenance and repair.

Portland’s Sign Code allows for maintenance, including changing light bulbs (i.e. neon tubes).<sup>268</sup> It also allows for repair, which is defined as fixing or replacing broken or worn parts with comparable materials.<sup>269</sup> Critically, maintenance and repair are allowed in position or off-site if the City is informed of the work. The code stipulates that signs cannot be down for more than six months and also allows for signs to be replaced if they fall victim to a disaster.<sup>270</sup> The result of this language is a sort of “maintenance clause” that allows maintenance and “like-for-like” repair. In this way, preservation of signs and restoration of broken parts of signs does not make a sign “new.” This allows for important work to be done without requiring the time and money necessary for city approval of a new sign. For vested nonconforming signs, it also avoids the uncertainty, time, and money of the variance process (i.e. the sign is still considered the same vested sign and does not need to apply for a variance). The same section of code, however, implies that a complete replacement of a sign (even using like-for-like materials) *does* make it a new sign, and it must come into conformity. It further notes that changing the wording on a sign would also make it a new sign. Taken together, this means that the preservation and most restoration of old signs is possible without making a sign “new” and triggering further processes, but their rehabilitation, reconstruction, or restoration to a lost earlier period is not.

Those changes that do make a sign “new” are called structural alterations and require the sign to go through a formal approval process. Nonconforming signs must also go through a variance process.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Title 32.42.030. In other words, city staff are not zealously scouring the landscape for unsafe signs to remove.

<sup>268</sup> Title 32.22.020.ZZ.

<sup>269</sup> Title 32.22.020.AAA.

<sup>270</sup> Title 32.36.020.

<sup>271</sup> Title 32.62.010.

Structural changes are those that alter a sign’s size, shape, height, location, structural materials, or type of electrical components.<sup>272</sup> Painted wall signs, for example, can be repainted in the same frame without becoming “new” because there is no structural change, but because neon is a structural element of a sign, changes to it make it a new sign. This definition positively affects neon signs by dis-incentivizing converting neon to LED (which is a different type of electrical component) when repairing the neon on a sign is just repair and not a structural alteration. It does not, however, allow for the need to alter signs so they can stay commercially viable and hinders the ability of signs that cannot remain in their current location to be relocated with ease. Importantly, it also does not affect a property owner’s ability to demolish a sign altogether, since demolition is a separate category from alteration. The only signs that have any protection from demolition are those that are designated historic resources as described above.

The process the City uses to approve a “new” or structurally altered sign varies based on a number of factors. If the sign is a designated historic resource or part of one (i.e. is itself or is a character-defining feature of a listed NRHP/historic/conservation landmark/district) or if it is greater than 32 sq.ft. within a Design Overlay Zone (DOZ), that sign must go through land use review (HRR or Design Review) for the changes to be approved for a permit.<sup>273</sup> Most signs within DOZs, however, can opt for the objective CDS track instead of Design Review. As mentioned in the historic resource protections section, most signs in conservation landmarks/districts can also use the CDS instead of HRR.<sup>274</sup> If the sign does not meet the land use review criteria, and it meets all other Title 32 standards (i.e. it is “conforming”), it just needs a permit.

Signs are subject to various levels of reviews by either staff or a commission depending on a number of factors including size and location. If the sign is in a DOZ, then land use review is through City staff or by the Design Commission. If it is a listed historic resource, then land use review is through City staff or the Historic Landmark Commission. Level of review is determined by the type of project, and is either Ix (staff; many signs), II (staff, but can be appealed to the commission), or III (commission; only for certain large projects), representing increasing levels of complexity and public involvement. How staff and commissions make their decisions is the subject of the next section on Design Guidelines.

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<sup>272</sup> Title 32.22.020.GGG.

<sup>273</sup> All signs within the South Auditorium Design District are subject to land use review, regardless of size. Also, Title 33.445 explicitly states that alteration of exterior signs requires HRR for historic landmarks/districts. This is an important clause that leaves no question as to whether alterations to signs “count” as alterations triggering review.

<sup>274</sup> This is true unless that sign is nonconforming, in which case it would need to go through HRR in order to get the variance needed to gain legal nonconforming status. In this way, nonconforming signs in most conservation areas are actually better protected than conforming signs.

Land use review can be a double-edged sword for neon signs. While they add time and cost to a project, they also provide protections that can stop inappropriate alterations (such as the complete removal of neon from a sign).

Regardless of their location, structural alterations to nonconforming signs require the sign to go through the City approval process (land use review or permit) and apply for a variance as part of that process to give the sign legal nonconforming status. Variances that are part of the Design Review or HRR process are called modifications, and all others are called adjustments. Adjustments are processed either by staff or by the Adjustment Committee as an Adjustment Review. Criteria used to determine if a variance request is successful vary based on the location of the sign. Within DOZs and historic resources, modifications are approved if the applicant shows their proposal better meets the appropriate design guidelines or HRR approval criteria and the purpose of the standard than a conforming sign.<sup>275</sup> These criteria shows how important Design Guidelines are, and they will be explored in the next section. It also allows for reviewers to consider if the preservation of the character of a historic resource is more important than meeting the purpose of the standard for which a modification has been requested. In other words, it allows retaining historic character to supersede other considerations and provides a valuable tool for preserving historic neon that may be nonconforming. Within all other areas, adjustments are approved if the applicant shows that either the adjustment will not lead to clutter and create a traffic hazard, and either display exceptional design or be more consistent with surrounding architecture; or the site presents particular difficulties that preclude effective conforming signs.<sup>276</sup> It is worth noting that all of these criteria provide some room for interpretation on the part of the reviewer, and a neon-friendly or adverse reviewer could reasonably come to different conclusions on similar variance requests. It is thus important that reviewers understand the value of neon.

The cost of going through these processes can be high and varies based on a number of factors. Permits range from \$200-\$500 depending on the sign's size. Design Review or HRR ranges from \$1,200-\$1,700. Modifications cost \$1,550 and have no guarantee of a successful outcome. Adjustments cost \$3,800.<sup>277</sup> This means that a non-conforming sign undergoing structural alterations must pay a

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<sup>275</sup> Title 33.825.040 and 33.846.070.

<sup>276</sup> Title 32.38.030.

<sup>277</sup> City of Portland, Bureau of Development Services, "Land Use Services Fee Schedule," March 1, 2020, [www.portlandoregon.gov/bds/article/727186](http://www.portlandoregon.gov/bds/article/727186) (accessed April 11, 2020). This fee schedule does provide a slight financial advantage for signs requiring modifications (in DOZs or historic/conservation landmarks/districts) over those outside of these zones requiring adjustments.

minimum of \$2,750 plus the time needed to complete the process in order to continue to exist following its alterations.

Finally, the regulations are always subject to change. The City is currently proposing to replace the objective CDS option with a new Design Standards option within DOZs (leaving the existing CDS applicable only to conservation landmarks/districts).<sup>278</sup> The new Design Standards are meant to manage growth in neighborhood centers around the city and apply the DOZ to more areas. Rather than the strict objective criteria of the CDS, the Design Standards include some required criteria plus some optional criteria, within which projects could choose from a points-based menu of options to reach a set threshold. This is a novel and welcome development that opens up room for incentivizing certain behavior within a previously rigid system, but its proposed implementation does not take advantage of opportunities to encourage retention of neon signs.

The points-based menu would only apply to new development or major remodels (defined as projects that increase floor area by 50% or have costs exceeding the current assessed total site improvement value), leaving smaller projects again with a purely objective set of standards. Remodels would be required to earn five points by meeting various standards from the menu. Admirably, one of the three tenants governing the re-write is “build on context by enhancing the distinctive physical, natural, historic and cultural qualities of the location while accommodating growth and change” (Public Realm and Quality being the other two). The application of this ideal has room for improvement though. Within this “Context” tenant, one feature for projects to consider is “Older Buildings/History,” which contains four standards. Regrettably, they only apply if the building being renovated is over 50 years old or next to a Historic Landmark. The first standard awards three points to projects that preserve more than 50% of an existing façade on a building with more than 4,000 sq. ft. of floor space. The second standard awards one point for extending existing building features into new development. The third standard awards one point if a plaque is erected interpreting a site’s history. The fourth standard, the only one that is required, awards one to three points to projects adjacent to nonresidential Historic Landmarks for being sensitive to the Landmark.

While explicit encouragement of preservation is laudable, the number of caveats is staggering, and signs are not mentioned at all. The effect is that certain projects could meet the standards by

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<sup>278</sup> City of Portland, Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, “Design Overlay Zone Amendments, Volume 3: Portland Citywide Design Guidelines,” prepared by Lora Lillard, et al., proposed draft, September 2019, [https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-09/doza\\_proposed\\_draft\\_volume\\_3.pdf](https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-09/doza_proposed_draft_volume_3.pdf) (accessed April 14, 2020).

preserving much of an existing façade, expanding a building in a sensitive way, and erecting a plaque, which may provide some encouragement to do so. There would be plenty of ways to meet the standards without considering preservation, however. In addition, an opportunity to award points based on the preservation of existing signs has been missed. The Design Standards do offer a template for such a scheme within the “Art and Special Features” feature of the Public Realm tenant. Here, optional standards are proposed awarding points for original art murals or city-approved art installations. Similar points could be awarded for preserving neon art, or the points could help facilitate the development of a small neon sign park as an art installation.

#### 1. Local City Code Language Issues

- The six-month limit on how long a sign can be down for repair and still be put back up as the same sign is not always enough time to complete a proper conservation project. Such a limit is unnecessary.
- Reconstruction of signs like-for-like should be allowed without making a sign “new.” If an existing sign is so far gone that it must be re-created from scratch using the same materials, this should be considered a restoration by code standards (or another allowable new classification) since it is a service to the city to re-create a historic sign rather than leaving an unsalvageable one to rot. Making reconstructions “new” signs encourages sign decay or incompatible new signs.
- The inability to change the wording on a sign and have it still be considered that same sign makes restorations of historic signs that have been altered more difficult. While it is natural that allowing new wording on an existing sign would constitute a new sign, the absence of a provision for restoring historic wording disincentivizes restoring historic signs that have lost integrity.
- Similarly, the inability to move signs to new locations and have them still count as the same sign, if they are endangered or if a business is forced out of its current location because of rising rents or other factors outside of their control, is a detriment to their preservation.
- The cost and time necessary to complete the land use review and variance processes for existing nonconforming signs could be a financial barrier to a small business. A minimum of \$2700 just for the right to exist may incentivize some sign owners to just scrap their existing neon sign and replace it with a plastic conforming sign that even with the cost of the sign and permit could still be less than altering their existing neon to fit their business.



- The Design Standards proposed to replace the CDS in DOZs do not encourage the preservation of neon signs. Additionally, because most preservation-related standards are not required and alteration projects would only need to consider optional standards for major remodels, many projects would not need to consider preservation at all. Even if a project did need to consider optional standards, there are countless ways to do so without considering preservation. The strongest preservation standard does not apply to small buildings and requires preserving only the majority of a façade. None of the standards apply if a building is under 50 years old. The result is very little incentive to protect neon signs, even indirectly.

### *c. Design Guidelines*

When a sign is required to go through land use review, staff and commissions make their decisions based on the Design Guidelines appropriate to the sign's location. Design Guidelines thus provide an important way to encourage the protection of neon signs in Portland. They are not, however a silver bullet, as design guidelines in DOZs are generally focused on producing compatible new construction and do not have guidelines encouraging the retention of existing fabric such as neon. Even for historic resources where design guidelines encourage the retention of existing fabric, each set of guidelines treats neon signs differently (if they are mentioned at all), creating areas of the city that are more encouraging of neon than others. Additionally, those signs located outside of DOZs or that are not listed historic resources do not enjoy the protection of design guidelines at all.

Which set of Design Guidelines to apply depends on where a sign is located. If the sign is in a DOZ in the Central City, the Central City Fundamental Design Guidelines (to be re-written in the near future) plus the subdistrict design guidelines (if any) apply. If the sign is in a DOZ outside of the Central City, area-specific guidelines or the Community Design Guidelines (currently being re-written) apply.

If the sign is part of a historic resource and in the Central City, the Central City Fundamental Design Guidelines plus the applicable historic district guidelines (if any) apply. If the sign is part of a historic resource and outside of the Central City, district-specific guidelines apply to specific districts.<sup>279</sup> Additionally, general approval criteria also apply to decisions about historic landmarks and districts

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<sup>279</sup> The Community Design Guidelines and the Historic Alphabet District Community Design Guidelines Addendum apply in the Alphabet Historic District. Also, the Lair Hill Design Guidelines are currently being replaced with new guidelines for South Portland.

without their own design guidelines. These generally require the preservation of historic character and materials and new elements to be compatible with the historic resource and district.<sup>280</sup>

Analysis of the various Design Guidelines reveals five categories from most to least friendly to neon signs. I have ranked these as: guidelines that (1) create special allowances for neon, (2) directly encourage neon, (3) implicitly encourage neon, (4) do not mention neon, and (5) implicitly discourage neon.

Neon signs that fall within the New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District or the Broadway “Bright Lights” area of the Central City enjoy the highest encouragement in the form of special allowances (Category 1). In New Chinatown/Japantown, neon is specifically mentioned as a character element within the Streetscape Elements and Public Realm theme’s History, Character and Context section. The guidelines also include a specific Signs section within the District Character section, noting that “signs can have a meaningful impact in preserving the district’s character” as the only historic district in Portland recognized for its cultural importance. It further states, “projecting signs in particular bring a sense of the unique cultural influence prevalent in the district” and encourages “signs of noticeable size” (greater than 30 sq.ft.) on certain streets. There is a specific guideline to retain historic signs. Also, new 3D ornate multi-part projecting signs (using metal, neon glass, and acrylic in a layered fashion) is encouraged and plastic is discouraged as a primary face.<sup>281</sup> Chinatown also falls within the bounds of the River District DOZ, which encourages reinforcing the identity of Chinatown by using ornate signs (with all neon signs used as examples). It further states, “signs which contribute to the festive Chinatown atmosphere should be encouraged even though they may be at variance with Zoning Code sign regulations,” and “lighted signs may be approved which exceed maximum area, number, projection, height and lighting regulations, or which flash or include exposed incandescent lamps, provided they constructively add to the festive atmosphere of the District. Traditional sign lighting methods, such as incandescent lamps and neon tubing are preferred.” Finally, it also implies that neon can reinforce the area around Union Station, which is characterized by a large neon sign.<sup>282</sup>

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280 Title 33.846.060.G,

281 City of Portland, Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, “New Chinatown / Japantown Historic District Design Guidelines” (Portland, 2017), [https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/ctjt-guidelines-adopted\\_web.pdf](https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/ctjt-guidelines-adopted_web.pdf) (accessed February 13, 2020).

282 City of Portland, Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. “River District Design Guidelines,” 1996, amended 2008, [https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/river\\_district\\_dg\\_2008sm.pdf](https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/river_district_dg_2008sm.pdf) (accessed February 12, 2020).

The River District DOZ also calls out a corridor along Broadway and W. Burnside as a “bright lights district” where bright lights should be encouraged. “For exceptional signs that are well integrated with building design, the City will allow greater latitude in sign area, lighting and materials in keeping with the concept of a ‘Bright Light District.’” Appropriate in this zone are “theatrical, exuberant, and flamboyant architectural forms, details, lights, and signs” and places “incorporating innovative lighting of buildings and signs that highlight the character and ambiance of Broadway, including signature vertically-oriented and vibrantly illuminated signs.” Two-thirds of examples shown for how to meet these guidelines are neon.<sup>283</sup>

Both of these areas are also called out in the Central City Fundamental Design Guidelines, which are scheduled to be revised soon, as “Special Areas” that “draw their identities from a collection of similarly-styled elements such as signs.” While Chinatown does have its own Design Guidelines, the Special Area strategy provides a quicker, easier, less expensive way to call out special areas than setting them aside with their own design guidelines (which take considerable time and money to develop). These Special Areas encourage but do not allow by right, mandate, or incentivize keeping historic neon. Nonconforming neon signs in these areas still have to go through the time and money of getting a variance; they’re just more likely to be approved. The New Chinatown/Japantown Unique Sign District (which covers a smaller area than the historic district) encourages signs at variance with the code that contribute to a festive atmosphere and mentions “bright colors” and House of Louie’s (now dark) neon as good examples that appropriately evoke character. The Broadway Unique Sign District section notes that signs here have traditionally been “larger, brighter, and more flamboyant” than the rest of downtown and allows for the development of “large, vertically-oriented, bright, and flamboyant signs” even if they are at odds with the code. It encourages “using neon lighting to augment the lit signs” and reusing old signs (while also allowing for suitably distinctive new signs as replacements) and allows for the possibility of variances to accommodate more changing images such as “moving” neon.<sup>284</sup> These areas both do have a particularly high number of neon signs compared to others around the city. In Chinatown, the majority of these signs are older, while on Broadway, many of them are new. In Chinatown, those that have been lost have largely been because businesses changed or closed, victims of the shift of the city’s Asian population center farther east. On Broadway, the high value of land has meant that many of the

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283 Ibid.

284 City of Portland, Bureau of Planning, “Central City Fundamental Design Guidelines,” prepared by Michael S. Harrison, et al., April 1, 2001, updated November 8, 2003, [https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/central\\_city\\_plan\\_fundamental\\_dg\\_2001.pdf](https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/central_city_plan_fundamental_dg_2001.pdf) (accessed February 13, 2020).

traditional entertainment uses on the street that prominently featured neon have given way to high-rise office buildings, and signs have been lost to demolition. Special Areas have no power to stop this. There is no data to determine whether the neon signs that exist in these areas were influenced by the Special Area rules, but the large number of neon signs present in the areas would seem to indicate that the special rules have helped. Without the power to incentivize or require the preservation of neon signs, however, Special Areas remain limited in their effectiveness.

Category 2 guidelines directly encourage neon and include Ladd's Addition, Central Eastside DOZ, the North Park Blocks area of the River District DOZ (which is otherwise silent on neon), and the North Interstate Corridor of the Community Design Guidelines. In Ladd's Addition, sign materials such as neon are encouraged and plastic discouraged for new construction, while noting that a sign should not be a dominant feature. For rehab work, retention or restoration of pre-1940 signs is encouraged.<sup>285</sup> In the Central Eastside, a specific goal is "using neon and wall signs, and banners to attractively present commercial themes." The guidelines also encourage owners to "retain and restore existing signage which reinforces the history and themes of the district, and permit new signage which reinforces the history and themes of the East Portland Grand Avenue historic district [which implicitly encourages neon]."<sup>286</sup> Within the North Park Blocks area, the River District guidelines say the neon character of the area should be reinforced. It specifically recommends "using neon, or indirectly-lit signs, rather than internally-lit signs." The sign used as an example, however – Powell's Technical Books – was lost with its building in the early 2010s. It also does not specifically address the importance of retaining existing neon signs.<sup>287</sup>

The Community Design Guidelines identify a number of "Plan Areas" where special considerations are warranted based on strategic plans those areas have created. One of these, the North Interstate Corridor, represents the most direct intervention the City of Portland has taken to protect neon signs. While the plan does include a special provision for changes to the Sign Code to incentivize the preservation of specific neon signs (the only area of the city to have its own special rules in the Sign Code), these incentives are not part of the Design Guidelines themselves; thus my classification of Interstate as a Category 2 guideline. The plan and its incentives will be explored and analyzed in more

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285 City of Portland, Bureau of Planning, "Ladd's Addition Conservation District Guidelines," 1988, [https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/laddsaddition\\_conservation\\_district\\_guidelines\\_2011\\_update.pdf](https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/laddsaddition_conservation_district_guidelines_2011_update.pdf) (accessed February 12, 2020).

286 City of Portland, Bureau of Planning, "Special Design Guidelines for the Design Zone of the Central Eastside District of the Central City Plan," prepared by Leo Dean Williams, July 31, 1991, [https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/central\\_east\\_side\\_district.pdf](https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/central_east_side_district.pdf) (accessed February 12, 2020).

287 City of Portland, "River District Design Guidelines."

depth in the next section of this chapter on Planning Documents, but it is represented in the Community Design Guidelines with this specific guideline: “Enhance the sense of place and identity by incorporating site and building design features that respond to the area’s desired characteristics and traditions.” This guideline can be met in the following way:

*Strengthening the cultural significance of Interstate Avenue’s iconic neon signs: The collection of neon signs along Interstate Avenue contributes to the corridor’s unique mid-20th century character. Retaining and reusing existing freestanding neon signs either on site, or on another acceptable site that fronts Interstate Avenue maintains the signs’ special presence on the street and the vibrant and colorful sparkle they offer at nighttime. New development should consider the integration of new and distinctive neon-type signage and/or lighting that complements the corridor’s context of existing signs and lighting.*

The guidelines also include an appendix calling out the nine specific iconic signs that define the area’s character. This one-page appendix represents the closest document to an official sign survey undertaken in Portland.<sup>288</sup>

Category 3 guidelines more implicitly encourage neon signs and include the Skidmore/Old Town Historic District, East Portland/Grand Avenue DOZ, and the Hollywood and Sandy Plan Area of the Community Design Guidelines. The Skidmore/Old Town Historic District guidelines specifically mention neon as a character element in the Streetscape Elements and the Public Realm theme within the History context. The Character and Context section also calls out the White Stag Sign as a “visual icon” and local landmark. The Signage section within the District Character guidelines encourages “restoring and amending historic signs that are evident or can be seen in historic photographs while allowing new content verbiage,” using materials and styles appropriate to the period. This provides an excellent encouragement for existing signs to be repurposed for new businesses. While it does not mention neon specifically, it is implied through the photographic examples of neon signs that are used. It further encourages modern signs inspired by old styles, which could imply new neon signs.<sup>289</sup>

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288 City of Portland, Bureau of Planning, “Community Design Guidelines,” prepared by Michael S. Harrison, et al., January 1998, updated September 2008. [https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/08\\_cdg\\_book2.pdf](https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/08_cdg_book2.pdf) (accessed February 13, 2020).

289 City of Portland, Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, “Skidmore / Old Town Historic District Design Guidelines,” 2016, [https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/skidmore-ot-design-guidelines\\_adopted-06012016-web.pdf](https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/skidmore-ot-design-guidelines_adopted-06012016-web.pdf) (accessed February 13, 2020).

The East Portland/Grand Avenue historic district guidelines mention that most of the once-common neon in the area has been replaced with backlit plastic, but highlights the important role neon historically played in the area in the example of the demolished Oriental Theater, which is used as the primary photograph on the introduction page and is captioned with: “The Theater’s prominent sign is typical of the strong role signs have traditionally played in shaping the District’s character.” The Signs section also notes that all exterior signs should be reviewed; encourages variety, prominent signs, and creative sign lighting; and discourages backlit plastic. It stops short, however, of explicitly mentioning neon.<sup>290</sup>

The Hollywood and Sandy plan area of the Community Design Guidelines specifically encourages bright lights but curiously make no mention of neon. Instead, they encourage “storefront facades that create a well-lit and festive pedestrian environment” through transparency, display windows, and accent lighting. While not nearly as explicit as the call for flashy signs in the Broadway district, it can be reasonably inferred that neon would be welcome in Hollywood and Sandy.

The Community Design Guidelines in general can be interpreted as mostly friendly to existing neon signs. The cover of the guidelines even features the neon blade of the Moreland Theater. They encourage owners to “respect the original character of buildings when making modifications that affect the exterior” by “preserving original signs and incorporating them in new designs when appropriate” and “using wall signs, window signs, canopy and projecting signs attached to the building in older commercial buildings and discouraging the use of freestanding signs, backlit signs, and plastic sign faces.” They also set a precedent for leaving old signs standing even after their businesses have closed by stating, “even though the Irvington Theater is gone, its historic sign is a neighborhood landmark that complements the street and sidewalk activity.”<sup>291</sup>

However, the Community Design Guidelines, written in 1998 and last updated in 2008, are in the process of being rewritten into the Portland Citywide Design Guidelines. The Proposed Draft from September 2019 remains generally friendly to neon. Guidelines 2 (“Build on the character and local identity of the place”) and 3 (“Create positive relationships with adjacent surroundings”) explicitly encourage new construction to respect existing setting, which would imply that that existing setting ought

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<sup>290</sup>City of Portland, Bureau of Planning, “Design Guidelines: East Portland/Grand Avenue Historic Design Zone,” prepared by William Wright, July 1994, [https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/eastpdx\\_grand\\_historic\\_design\\_zone.pdf](https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/eastpdx_grand_historic_design_zone.pdf) (accessed February 13, 2020).

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

not be torn down. Guideline 4 (“Integrate and enhance on-site features and opportunities to meaningfully contribute to a location’s uniqueness”) is even more direct. The background to the guideline states: “every site has a history, and where appropriate, development should build upon and reflect its history, passing along the narrative of the site. Archeological and historic features of the site can be retained and incorporated, influencing the site layout where possible, to help augment the sense of place and its unique value.”<sup>292</sup> Despite the caveats of “where appropriate” and “where possible,” this guideline is an explicit call to preserve existing fabric. It goes even farther, speaking directly to neon when it says that the guideline can be accomplished by “maintaining a site’s uniqueness by repurposing architectural elements, such as sculptural neon signage and character defining canopies.”<sup>293</sup> Unfortunately, this strategy (illustrated in the document by the St. John’s Signal Station and its architecturally-integrated neon façade sign on the former gas station’s tower) appears to apply only to architecturally-integrated neon and not include much more prevalent projecting, freestanding, or rooftop signs. This language should be amended to explicitly apply to these kinds of signs as well. An additional way the document states the guideline can be accomplished is by “retrofitting existing buildings with new storefront systems, while retaining character-defining details such as brick pilasters and detailing.”<sup>294</sup> Again, while this example could certainly be interpreted as pertaining to signs, an opportunity is missed in not explicitly making this connection and focusing instead strictly on the building itself. Thus, while the proposed new Portland Citywide Design Guidelines are generally friendly to existing fabric, including neon signs, they stop short of directly encouraging saving most signs.

Guidelines in Category 4 that do not mention neon signs include those for Lair Hill, Historic Alphabet District, King’s Hill Historic District, Yamhill Historic District, and Marquam Hill DOZ. They tend to encourage retention of historic character, styles, materials, and changes over time, however, which could help protect neon where it exists. Guidelines in Category 5 that implicitly discourage neon include those for Terwilliger Parkway DOZ, Macadam Corridor DOZ, Gateway Regional Center DOZ, South Waterfront DOZ, Lloyd District DOZ, Goose Hollow DOZ, and NW 13<sup>th</sup> Ave. Historic District. This is done in various ways from encouraging signs not to compete with painted wall signs to encouraging signs

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292 City of Portland, Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, “Design Overlay Zone Amendments, Volume 2: Code & Map Amendments,” prepared by Lora Lillard, et al., proposed draft, September 2019, [https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-09/doza\\_proposed\\_draft\\_volume\\_2.pdf](https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-09/doza_proposed_draft_volume_2.pdf) (accessed April 14, 2020), 30.

293 Ibid., 32.

294 Ibid., 33.

to be incorporated into building architecture in a uniform way that does not allow for the artisan style of neon.

As a whole, Design Guidelines diverge dramatically in their approach to neon signs from explicitly encouraging them and creating allowances for larger, brighter signs; to encouraging retention of historic fabric where it exists; to staying completely silent on the issue; to implicitly discouraging them. These guidelines can be effective in preserving neon signs when they are required to be used, but they still have no power to compel and very little power to incentivize neon sign retention. In addition, changes to many existing neon signs would not have to go through the land use review process that utilizes Design Guidelines and thus need only to meet the standards of the Sign Code or CDS (or the proposed new Design Standards), which neither encourage preservation nor incentivize any one sign technology over another.

#### 1. Local Design Guidelines Issues

- Design Guidelines vary dramatically in their encouragement of the preservation of neon signs, leading to areas of the city where neon signs have lesser protection than others.
- Design Guidelines are used as approval criteria, and can, when written to do so, be quite forceful. Even so, they do not explicitly compel particular actions (they are, after all, guidelines rather than requirements). Thus, even in areas where retention of existing neon signs is strongly encouraged, it is not required, and significant neon signs could still be inappropriately altered.
- Even in Special/Plan Areas set aside to encourage neon signs, there is no stated benefit for doing so. Allowance and encouragement can only go so far. While these areas allow nonconforming signs that might not be allowed elsewhere and thus remove the question mark from the variance process for existing neon signs, they do little to incentivize their retention.

#### *d. Planning Documents*

The final area of local regulations that can affect neon sign preservation in Portland is local planning documents. Planning documents come in many forms and set priorities that influence codified policies. They are important tools that provide vision, set direction, and provide justification for municipal decision-making. This section looks briefly at architectural surveys before focusing on the City's most ambitious neon sign preservation effort to date: the North Interstate Corridor Plan.

Architectural surveys, also called inventories, are important tools that cities can use to identify built environment resources that may be significant, thus informing decisions about how conservation



measures can be implemented. Often used to identify historic resources, these surveys can be done either geographically or thematically. At their most comprehensive scale, such as Portland's 1984 HRI, they attempt to encompass the entire city. Other times, they may focus on specific resources, such as mid-century modern properties or even signs. No survey of Portland's potentially significant signs has been undertaken to date.

Surveys are generally accompanied by historic contexts, which provide in-depth descriptions of significant historic themes identified within a defined geographic area and time period. By establishing historic contexts as part of an inventory, surveyors create the "bubble" of what is considered important about an area that justifies what is included in a survey and why. This also helps city decision makers identify particular historical themes that may not have already been apparent and thus understand and tell the "story" of the city more effectively. It can also make easier the identification and inclusion of additional resources yet to be discovered that also fit into those historic contexts. A 1993 draft document of a Historical Context Statement for Portland was discovered in the digital State Library archives, but no record of it could be found on the City's website, so it is unclear if it became an official document. This document contains no mention of neon. Its only mention of signage is as an element of Chinatown and noting motels and gas stations from the post-war era, where "signs [were] more important than buildings."<sup>295</sup> Cities like Los Angeles have shown that it is possible to create a citywide historic context for signs. As part of its recent SurveyLA project, the city identified contexts including Commercial Development 1850-1980, within which is the 45-page theme of Commercial Signs 1906-1980.<sup>296</sup> This type of context can provide an important basis for a NRHP MPS or other types of protection for signs. Portland has no historic context for its neon or other historic signs at this time.

While Portland has not commissioned a citywide inventory in 36 years, it did conduct a small survey of the commercial center of the Montavilla neighborhood in early 2019.<sup>297</sup> Still in draft form, the survey mentions the reconstructed neon marquee and façade of the Academy Theater but does not include

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295 City of Portland, Planning Bureau, "Draft Portland Historical Context Statement," October 1993, available at <https://digital.osl.state.or.us/islandora/object/osl%3A12494> (accessed February 29, 2020).

296 Catherine Gudis, "Los Angeles Citywide Historic Context Statement; Context: Commercial Development, 1850-1980; Theme: Commercial Signs, 1906-1980," Los Angeles Historic Resources Survey, July 2016, [https://planning.lacity.org/odocument/03d09336-aa3e-416c-96b4-4368938aa9e9/CommercialSigns\\_1906-1980\\_0.pdf](https://planning.lacity.org/odocument/03d09336-aa3e-416c-96b4-4368938aa9e9/CommercialSigns_1906-1980_0.pdf) (accessed February 29, 2020).

297 This survey was conducted through consulting firm ARG and integrated into a University of Oregon course in which I took part.

neon in the larger context language.<sup>298</sup> The City does intend to add the identified Montavilla resources to the official HRI in the future. Larger thematic surveys have been done as well, including two 2011 surveys of modern resources meant to discover some of those resources that were too new to have been captured in the 1984 inventory. Of the two, “Modern Historic Resources of East Portland” more completely acknowledges neon signs. A picture of the large Powell Villa neon sign is on the front cover, and in its context statement it uses this sign to lead into a discussion identifying large neon signs as an important feature of the landscape. It goes on to list a number of these signs, forming a sort of unofficial neon sign survey for the district:

*Powell Villa does retain at least one character-defining feature, its bold neon sign, albeit updated with some non-descript panels featuring current tenants. This seems to be a minor trend across Mid-Century buildings in East Portland: Even when the building is substantially altered, the eye catching signage remains in place and largely intact. It stands to reason that the original impetus for the signage, catching the eye of rapidly passing drivers, remains a continuing need. In addition to the Powell Villa standard, other signs of note can be found at Ron Tonkin Chevrolet, the Del Rancho Motel, Al’s Shoes and Boots, the Canton Grill (including a humorous sign pointing to parking), the Rainbow Dragon Restaurant, and even the Woodland Park Chapel.*<sup>299</sup>

It further mentions the use of neon as roofline illumination, calling out specifically the now-demolished early McDonald’s on Powell.<sup>300</sup> While not a complete survey of neon signs nor a complete neon sign context, the brief mention and listing of neon signs in the survey represents an important precedent and acknowledgement of the historic value of neon signs in Portland.

The “Modern Historic Resources in the Central City” document focuses primarily on buildings from 1945-1985, with very little mention of neon signs. This may be explained by the possibility that many of Portland’s neon signs in this more urban core were built prior to 1945 and might not be included

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298 Brandon Spencer-Hartle, email exchange, April 14, 2020. While there is additional neon within the survey area, much more has been lost, and neon is likely not a character-defining feature of the neighborhood currently.

299 City of Portland, Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, “Modern Historic Resources in the Central City: A Reconnaissance Survey,” prepared by Peter Meijer, September 2011, <https://efiles.portlandoregon.gov/Record/13181495> (accessed February 13, 2020).

300 Matthew Korfhage, “The Third Oldest McDonald’s in America Will Be Demolished in Portland Next Month,” *Willamette Week*, January 26, 2018, [www.wweek.com/restaurants/2018/01/26/the-third-oldest-mcdonalds-in-america-will-be-demolished-in-portland-next-month](http://www.wweek.com/restaurants/2018/01/26/the-third-oldest-mcdonalds-in-america-will-be-demolished-in-portland-next-month) (accessed April 16, 2020). The demolition of this rare 1962 McDonald’s, the third oldest in the world, was a significant and senseless loss.

in such a survey. The only real mention of signs is a recognition of roadside architecture in the Banfield Portal area, which features a historic photo of five large signs at a single intersection (some of which are neon). It also mentions the strong integrity of one such (plastic) roadside sign at the 1963 Galaxy restaurant.<sup>301</sup> This sign and building were lost in 2013. While neon signs, and signs in general, are rarely mentioned in this survey, equally disturbing is the fact that across both surveys from only nine years ago, two of the three signs prominently called out for their significance have been lost (McDonald's and Galaxy restaurants; Powell Villa remains). This provides further evidence that, even with a generally friendly code and some surveys that briefly mention old signs, the lack of any dedicated, comprehensive action to protect these signs means that even the most significant among them continue to disappear. The City has made one noble but largely unsuccessful attempt to protect neon signs in one specific area, however.

#### 1. North Interstate Corridor Plan

Following the expansion of Portland's MAX light rail line onto N. Interstate Ave. in 2004, the city created the North Interstate Corridor Plan in 2008 to help manage change in the area. Mass transit brings with it increased development, and the City knew that planning had to be undertaken to ensure the introduction of the MAX met the needs of residents of this close-in but traditionally underserved area as well as the city as a whole. Included in this plan was the creation of an experimental "neon sign district" meant to protect the large mid-century neon signs that proliferated along the avenue and encourage new development that was compatible with them. The district was "the first of its kind in the country," said Jennifer Cagasan in her 2012 thesis on neon signs, "and can serve as a model for other areas that are densely populated with historic neon electric displays."<sup>302</sup> Twelve years after its creation, we can more effectively evaluate the effectiveness of this innovative attempt to protect not a cluster of signs (as in Special Areas of Design Guidelines) or individual signs (as with historic landmarking) but a linear corridor of signs on the local version of Route 66.

The planning records that led to this important planning document are held in a folder at the City Archives.<sup>303</sup> Planners recognized the importance of the road's neon sign collection early in the planning process, and worked to craft a method for ensuring they remained in the face of development. Much of the language in early drafts was implemented. They encouraged "Strengthening the cultural significance

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301City of Portland, "Modern Historic Resources in the Central City."

302 Cagasan, "A Methodology for Preserving Las Vegas Neon Electric Displays," 114.

303 Information in this paragraph is drawn from City of Portland Archives, Design Commission Review, 2008.

of Interstate Avenue’s iconic neon signs” as a Community Design Guideline goal in order to “contribute to distinctive mid-century character, offer unique nighttime vitality, [and foster] relationships to building lighting and architecture” and proposed the creation of a neon sign district to include four motel and two restaurant signs. Recognizing that the small motels and restaurants that were home to the signs would face increased pressure to sell to developers for denser uses, they sought to craft ways to maintain and reuse the existing, mostly free-standing signs, on site or elsewhere fronting Interstate as well as encourage new development to consider “neon-type” signage that complements the existing signs. To accomplish these goals, they drafted design guidelines and mentioned a number of specific signs that epitomized these ideals, even noting that the signs on the motels were more valuable than the buildings. Some of these signs, such as the Economy and Monticello Motels, were not included in the final listing, since they had lost integrity, but the majority were. The inspirations for this new district were the Special Areas of Broadway, Chinatown, and Hollywood that were identified in other design guidelines to provide allowances for large neon signs, but the planners wanted to tailor their plan to this area where the main threat was current businesses going under or getting bought out. Recognizing that the only sign on the road that had any official recognition was the Palms Motel (ranked on the HRI), they discussed ideas including allowances to reuse the shape of existing signs if neon was kept and creating an official sign park. While these ideas were not ultimately implemented, these important conversations set a precedent for the possible use of them in the future. Notably, they decided not to pursue historic resource protections because of the perceived difficulty Oregon owner consent laws presented. While preservation advocates continue to chisel away at this barrier, it still exists today.

What was implemented was a good faith effort to creatively protect these important signs. However, while it has certainly not been detrimental to signs along the road, there is little evidence to suggest it has worked as effectively as intended. The final North Interstate Corridor Plan was passed in August 2008 and included the proposed sign district. Chair of the Portland Planning Commission, Don Hanson, praised the district’s support of “grassroots efforts to celebrate the corridor’s mid-century legacy,” showing not only the power of grassroots efforts to effect change in Portland but also the support neon sign preservation had from powerful people in city government. The Neon Sign District, as implemented, stretches from Overlook to Kenton Stations and takes in the breadth of “large whimsical neon signs” along the route. It encourages the retention and reuse of existing neon and mid-century signs either on site or relocated along the road and encourages new development to incorporate neon. The method chosen to reach these goals was the special design review criteria discussed in the Design Guidelines section above and amendments to the Sign Code to encourage the re-use of nine specific signs

(two of which were not neon) that were seen as the street's best examples. The section of the plan showing these signs is included here as Appendix C.

The Sign Code amendments were designed to allow not so much for the on-site preservation of the signs but for their streamlined relocation. Noting that the large existing signs were nonconforming and thus could not be relocated without needing a variance, and without a strong precedent for the relocation of historic signs, the plan created new rules in the code that apply just to these nine signs. They are:

- Signs are allowed to be moved without requiring a variance. Essentially, they could remain legally non-conforming even after being moved. This would save owners time, money, and uncertainty.
- Relocated signs do not count toward the site's maximum sign area allocations but do require Design Review. This allowance shows the City's understanding of the need to build in incentives while still ensuring relocated signs maintain their character.
- Signs can be stored indefinitely before relocating.<sup>304</sup>

A close examination of the fate of these nine signs 12 years later shows that seven of them still exist, relatively unaltered and in reasonably good condition, in their original locations.<sup>305</sup> (Figure 50) Two, the Crown Motel and Interstate Lanes, were lost when their buildings were demolished and replaced with high-density apartment blocks. At first glance, seven of nine signs remaining seems like a victory. It is difficult to establish causation, however, especially considering that, while the Design Guidelines encouraged the retention of the signs, the focus of the code amendments (the most innovative part of the district regulations) was not meant to preserve signs in place but to allow them to be relocated. The code changes do nothing to encourage signs to remain in place, and they failed to provide for the relocation of the two signs that could have benefited from them when their buildings were demolished. The seven businesses that own the seven remaining signs have not folded or been bought, which might have necessitated the sign relocation the code was designed to allow. It is in the case of the Crown Motel and

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304 City of Portland, Bureau of Planning, "North Interstate Corridor Plan," August 2008,

<https://portland.gov/sites/default/files/2020-01/north-interstate-corridor-plan-2008.pdf> (accessed February 13, 2020).

305 They include the Alibi and Nite Hawk restaurants and the Palms, Viking, Westerner, Budget, and Super Value motels.

Interstate Lanes that the code amendments were put to the test, and here they failed to provide for the signs' relocation.

The ultimate fate of the Interstate Lanes sign is unknown, but it is not relocated elsewhere along Interstate. The Crown Motel was endangered even before the plan was put into place. The new owners of the site did not think the large crown and sword sign were appropriate or financially viable for their affordable housing block and would not keep it on site. They did allow for it to be moved, and the now-defunct Atomic Age Alliance PDX and Mid-Century Modern League organizations mounted a strong grassroots advocacy effort to pay for the sign's removal, find a place to store it, and secure a new location for it along Interstate. The leader of that campaign, Alyssa Starelli, noted that the sign was ultimately sold to local design-build firm Arciform, who still has it, but that the \$80,000 price tag necessary for restoration has left it grounded. While the sign still exists, even a strong grassroots preservation effort and the allowances of the neon sign district have not been able to get the sign back into public view.<sup>306</sup> All is not lost, however. As long as the sign is safe, there remains the possibility that it could yet someday take advantage of the district's code allowances and return to the road. Additionally, a drive along the road today does not show an abundance of new neon. One new neon sign used as an example in the plan document, the Krakow Koffee House beside the Alibi, was lost when the business closed. The business currently in the space kept the shape of the neon sign but replaced the neon components with backlit plastic.

There are a number of factors that may have contributed to the district's general lack of success thus far:

- The plan may have been too late. By waiting until after the MAX had already arrived to create and implement the plan, the City missed an opportunity to be proactive. Signs like the Crown Motel may have been saved if their needs were anticipated earlier.
- The plan's focus on providing for the relocation of signs misses an opportunity to plan for the preservation of signs in place. Planners reasonably anticipated that the signs would be endangered and would all need to come down when their businesses failed; but they failed to provide regulations or incentives for those signs that have not needed to move because their

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306 Alyssa Starelli, email exchange, December 10, 2019.

businesses carry on. Most of the businesses do remain, and thus the plan does nothing to help their signs.

- The regulations have no teeth. This is a case of incentives and outreach not being enough without the “stick” of regulation. While the two lost signs had the ability to relocate, and potential recipient sites were legally able to accept them, the signs were ultimately not relocated. There were no regulations in place to actually protect the signs, and allowances proved to be insufficient.
- The incentives that were put into place do not go far enough. Allowing a nonconforming sign to be relocated without a variance is a nice bonus for someone who already wants to do so and may even push them over the edge if they’re on the fence, but the small savings in time, money and certainty gained are unlikely to change anyone’s mind who was not already inclined to, or make up for the other hurdles involved in restoring and relocating a sign. Further, while the code changes remove the barrier of a variance, they include the requirement of Design Review. This step seems unnecessary for the relocation of an unchanged sign within the allowable zone unless the relocated sign has been structurally altered.

The Interstate Neon Sign District was a valiant effort to creatively protect important neon signs in Portland. Its current lack of success does not mean that it may not yet be helpful in preserving the remaining seven signs in the district if they should become endangered. Further, it provides an important first attempt and precedent for other neon sign preservation efforts at the city level. These future efforts can learn from the Interstate case study and should think seriously about addressing those factors that could be improved and focus on proactive preservation of signs in place through strong regulations and incentives that go beyond simple allowances.

## 2. Local Planning Documents Issues

- No inventory or historic context exists for neon signs (or historic signs in general) in Portland. Without such a document, it is difficult to effectively plan for or garner support for their protection. If decisionmakers do not know where the city’s neon signs are and why they’re important, they cannot plan for their protection.
- The Interstate Neon Sign District was too little too late and missed an opportunity to protect neon signs where they stand. The result has been a creative strategy that has not yet been successful at

meeting its goal of relocating signs that could not remain in their original location. In addition, it did nothing to protect signs within the corridor that were not on the exclusive list of nine.

## ***II. Local Incentives***

The kinds of incentives potentially available to neon signs at the national and state levels are largely absent at the local level. Tax credits are not something that local governments have the power to give. Grants to protect neon could come from various branches of city or regional government, but no such grants have been available locally with one notable exception. Prosper Portland's (formerly Portland Development Commission [PDC]) Storefront Improvement Program (SIP), now rolled into the Prosperity Investment Program (PIP), has provided funds for the conservation of roughly half a dozen old neon signs around the city along with many new neon signs.<sup>307</sup>

Prosper Portland is the economic development wing of local city government. Their SIP grant was an economic incentive designed to help business owners within designated urban renewal areas (URA) fix up their storefronts and improve business. Grants like this are an important recognition that a little bit of financial assistance from a city can return dividends in additional tax revenues while encouraging small business growth and improving neighborhood character. This iteration of the grant offered up to \$20,000 to local small business owners for storefront improvements to buildings at least five years old, with an additional \$12,000 that could be used for signage. There was no encouragement or requirement to use the funds for preservation as opposed to new construction for signs nor any special mention of neon.<sup>308</sup> The grant was always available only in certain URAs, though which URAs were eligible in a given year changed over time. Initially, applicants were also paired with architecture firms, and the grant covered 30 hours of design work and permitting help as well.

In 2016, SIP was combined with other programs designed to help commercial buildings to create the PIP grant. The grant now covers interior work as well and does not include a partnership with an architecture firm but remains similar to the SIP. The program offers a noncompetitive 50% matching grant up to \$50,000 to buildings in the Lents, Central Eastside, Downtown, and River District URAs, and a 75/25 match up to \$75,000 in the Interstate Corridor URA. Signage is specifically listed as an acceptable use of the funds. Businesses are limited to one grant within a 10-year period and businesses

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<sup>307</sup> The information in this section, except where noted, is drawn from Pamela Johnson, conversation with the author, January 22, 2020.

<sup>308</sup> Portland Development Commission, "Storefront Improvement Program Guidelines and Requirements," provided to author by Pamela Johnson of Prosper Portland.



are required to maintain their property in good order for five years (though Prosper Portland does not seek to re-collect awarded money if the business folds during that time). In addition, businesses must be local, and franchises must have 3 or fewer locations to be eligible. The grants are currently tied to City social equity goals as well, and at least 20% of the work performed on a building must be done by Minority & Woman-owned Businesses. Funds come from tax increment financing, a common funding strategy that dedicates a portion of property taxes from a certain area (the URAs in this case) to fund projects, loans, and grants within the area.<sup>309</sup> Further details on the program are provided in Appendix D.

Similar to the SIP grant, the only requirements for the PIP grant are that building alterations meet code; the form the work takes is completely up to the business owner. Thus, while neon signs may be mentioned as a possibility along with other possibilities, there is no incentive or encouragement for the money to be used in this way. Because of the Sign Code's "maintenance clause," however, it requires fewer hoops to conserve an existing sign than to create a new one. At least six old neon signs have benefited from the program, including Hung Far Low, Oregon Leather, Star Theatre, Irvington Theater, Everett Auto, Joe's Burgers, and Miller Paint. (Figures 51-52) Projects are currently in process for some Interstate motel signs. There is unfortunately no way to track what percentage of grants have gone to neon signs vs. other signs nor signs vs. other property improvements over the years. A representative of Prosper Portland was not aware of any old neon signs that had used the grant that have been lost since receiving the grant nor of anyone expressing an interest in replacing an existing neon sign with a plastic one. This noncompetitive grant program ensures that virtually any qualifying business with a neon sign that is able to provide a cash match can fix up their neon sign. It has been critical to saving a number of important neon signs around the city and should be more heavily advertised to business owners who may be unaware that the funds can be used for their neon signs.

The restoration of many grant recipient neon signs has made local news. The *Portland Business Journal* reported in 2012 that, "a wave of new and newly remodeled signs has sprung up across Portland [thanks to the] Storefront Improvement Program...The program has yielded a visual feast in downtown." Business owners lauded neon for attracting attention and customers, and the program even helped neon sign shop Artico Lite update their own building.<sup>310</sup> The restoration of Chinatown's Hung Far Low sign

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309 "Prosperity Investment Program," Prosper Portland website, <https://prosperportland.us/portfolio-items/prosperity-investment-program-pip> (accessed January 21, 2020).

310 Wendy Culverwell, "Gallery: Artico Lite's Neon Signs Light Up Portland," *Portland Business Journal*, March 5, 2012, [www.bizjournals.com/portland/blog/2012/03/gallery-splashy-neon-signs-gain-favor.html](http://www.bizjournals.com/portland/blog/2012/03/gallery-splashy-neon-signs-gain-favor.html) (accessed January 21, 2020).

garnered a considerable amount of coverage. New owners of the building in 2008 were stunned at how often people stopped to photograph the sign, but roofers working on the building discovered its supports were rusted through, rendering it unsafe. It was removed to a sign yard in nearby Scappoose, but “Portland citizens [including the business owners] rallied to restore the 2,000-pound landmark, raising more than \$8,600 through commemorative t-shirt sales, a website and special events. PDC closed the remaining gap with approximately \$45,000 in grant funding. The total cost of the project – which includes removal of the sign, design and restoration work, and its re-attachment to the building, is estimated at \$77,461.”<sup>311</sup> That \$45,000 came from a SIP grant. While it would have been easier for the owners to make a new sign that advertised their own business (Hung Far Low the business had moved away by this time), they recognized that, “other than Chinatown's Gateway arch, the Hung Far Low sign is the most recognizable symbol of a neighborhood that once was the heart of Portland’s Chinese-American community.”<sup>312</sup> The sign was painstakingly restored by Security Signs using as much original material as possible. Ultimately, only the top of the pagoda and bottom half of the support structure were salvageable, but the project followed reconstruction best practices by ensuring that what needed to be replaced exactly matched the original look and material.<sup>313</sup> The new sign was unveiled in a ceremony in 2010 and is expected to last at least 50 years. Unfortunately, while it would have been possible to restore the neon on the sign, which had long since disappeared, this historical aspect was not brought back due to the added cost. Perhaps if it had had the possibility of receiving up to \$75,000, as is the case currently in the Interstate URA, Hung Far Low might have been lit by neon once again, but the restoration of this iconic former neon sign is still a testament to the power of strong incentives and community advocacy to be the difference that saves a sign from disappearing entirely.

Portland also has a unique regional government structure called Metro, that reaches across city and county boundaries to provide services, including grants, to the entire metro region. There do not appear to be any Metro grants with an obvious connection to neon signage, however. The closest option may be Community Enhancement Grants, which are available to cities, nonprofits, or schools to help

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311 Patrick Alan Coleman, “Hung Far Low Sign Will Be Re-erected,” *Portland Mercury*, August 18, 2010, [www.portlandmercury.com/BlogtownPDX/archives/2010/08/18/hung-far-low-sign-will-be-re-erected](http://www.portlandmercury.com/BlogtownPDX/archives/2010/08/18/hung-far-low-sign-will-be-re-erected) (accessed January 21, 2020).

312 Anna Griffin, “Restoration of Portland’s Hung Far Low Sign Done with Painstaking Detail,” *Portland Oregonian*, August 17, 2010, [www.oregonlive.com/news/oregonian/anna\\_griffin/2010/08/restoration\\_of\\_portlands\\_hung.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/news/oregonian/anna_griffin/2010/08/restoration_of_portlands_hung.html) (accessed January 21, 2020).

313 The Hung Far Low sign story is an excellent example of the often-blurry line between restoration and reconstruction. Almost every sign project ends up utilizing a variety of approaches.

areas affected by garbage transfer facilities to “enhance neighborhood appearance or cleanliness” or “improve neighborhood livability.” No specific exclusion existed online to bar neon signs from benefitting from this money.<sup>314</sup>

Ultimately, Portland’s local incentives to help preserve neon signs are limited, but the few signs that have benefited from the lone program that exists have done so in a big way. The relatively wide geographic area covered by Prosper Portland’s PIP grant, its noncompetitive status, and its high dollar amount make this a valuable tool for making neon sign conservation a financial reality in Portland.

*a. Local Incentives Issues*

- The Prosper Portland PIP grant is only available in certain URAs. It is also the only local grant funding available to Portland neon signs. Thus, a large swath of the city, and its neon signs, have no local source of financial incentives to help with the high cost of sign preservation.
- The PIP grant also offers no incentive or encouragement for a business owner to choose preservation of an existing neon sign over its replacement with a new non-neon sign. The lack of such encouragement means the removal of a neon sign thanks to the grant is just as possible as a restoration.

**III. Local Advocacy and Outreach**

Portland has an active array of advocates for neon signs. These do not, however, include the local preservation nonprofit. The Bosco-Milligan Foundation operates the Architectural Heritage Center (AHC) and has a robust set of activities from operating a museum out of their storefront office building to lectures on a variety of preservation and history topics to regular history and architecture-focused walking tours of Portland neighborhoods. They also serve as a primary source for individuals looking to preserve their old homes, advocate around local preservation issues including upzoning efforts that may endanger old homes, and helped compile an MLS for local African American resources in Portland. The organization’s mission is to “inspire people to conserve the art, craft, and context of historic buildings and places to promote our cultural heritage as a vital element of livable, sustainable communities,” and mentions “regular vernacular vintage homes and storefronts that collectively define our neighborhoods,

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314 “Community Enhancement Grants,” Oregon Metro website, [www.oregonmetro.gov/tools-partners/grants-and-resources/community-enhancement-grants](http://www.oregonmetro.gov/tools-partners/grants-and-resources/community-enhancement-grants) (accessed January 23, 2020).

traditional downtowns, culture, history, and quality of life.”<sup>315</sup> All of this work is amenable to neon sign advocacy, but it has not yet been a priority for the group. Founded in the 1960s by an enterprising duo of salvagers saving architectural elements of buildings being demolished at the time, the AHC has traditionally focused on Portland’s earlier history, architectural fabric, and domestic buildings. There are signs that the AHC is broadening its scope, as a recent fundraiser worked to bring a younger generation into the fold with a mid-century modern theme and dance party. While other priorities have risen to the fore thus far, there is opportunity for the AHC to be a leader in neon sign preservation advocacy in Portland.

Much of the advocacy and outreach work being done in Portland is by individuals. Leading the charge is Kate Widdows, whose love of neon came through a passion for typography and graphic design. She developed the Electric Letterland project and leads regular neon walking tours of downtown Portland. She has also produced a printed map of Portland neon. While not an official publication of the city, it represents the most comprehensive survey of the city’s neon sign stock to date and was a primary source for my map produced for this paper. Ron Bronson’s @portlandneon Instagram handle also documents neon signs throughout the city and presents Portland neon to hundreds of followers nationwide.

A simple Google search for “Portland neon” or “Portland’s best neon” also produces thousands of results, many of which are blogs from residents or travelers extolling the virtues of the city’s neon. Andrew Kaiser posted about “Portland’s best neon signs” on the website for real estate company PDX Urban in 2018, noting that “while Las Vegas may be the world's capitol for bright and over the top neon wonders, Portland certainly has its fair share of glorious signage worthy of excellence.” He specifically mentions the rarity of signs like the Portland Outdoor Store and says, “I don't think there is a single person living in Portland who is not familiar with the neon sign for the Palms Motor Hotel.”<sup>316</sup> The Kristi Does PDX blog is written by a lifelong Portlander and local news producer who also created a “best neon in Portland” page where she calls neon a passion project: “Why is neon my passion? I don’t know. I guess I’m weird? I just love what a good neon sign can do to a neighborhood. It really adds warmth and a level of fun that other signs just can’t compete with.”<sup>317</sup> Kristi’s

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315 Architectural Heritage Center website (Portland, OR), <http://visitahc.org> (accessed February 12, 2020)..

316 Kaiser, “Portland’s Best Neon Signs.”

317 One of the signs on her 2015 list, the New Copper Penny Bar & Grill, has since been lost when its building was demolished to make way for a mixed-use apartment block.

consideration of herself as “weird” for liking neon shows that those doing advocacy about the value of neon are not all as aware of one another as they might be.

Neon Gods founder Michael Mintz is a sign restorer as well as advocate. His 2017 GoFundMe campaign raised almost \$2,000 from 37 donors to help restore the Chin’s Kitchen sign when it was purchased by new owners.<sup>318</sup> Security Signs owner Kevin Keljo could also be considered a neon advocate, saving endangered signs by storing them in the company warehouse. Others with a national neon focus also call Portland home. Ted Zahn is a local writer, designer, and photographer whose @neonhunting Instagram handle has over 6,000 followers. He sells prints of his photos and recently self-published a book of many of the best. Vintage Roadside is an online information hub and store run by a Portland couple. Their website has detailed information on the history of roadside attractions, links, bibliographies and a store selling photos as well as prints and t-shirts featuring old advertisements, many of which include prominent neon signs. Each product page also has a detailed history of the real place advertised. The Willamette Light Brigade, while not overtly doing neon advocacy, is still an ally with its Winter Light Festival, bridge lighting, and advocacy for vibrant nighttime streetscapes. It is at this individual, independent, grassroots level that most of the neon advocacy and outreach is happening in Portland today.

In researching this paper, I spoke with multiple neon advocates throughout the city, but their connection to one another was loose. There may be some benefits to a lack of centralization, allowing for multiple perspectives and broad appeal even to those not compelled to join an advocacy group. Such an approach forgoes the strength in numbers and collective bargaining power gained through unification, however. Kate Widdows is working to connect the disparate group of neon advocates throughout the city into a mobilized unit and recently started the PDX Neon group with Michael Mintz. Still in its nascent stages, PDX Neon may prove to be a powerful force for bringing people together around a common love of neon. While individuals can have an outsized impact, Chapter 5 shows that the most transformative change is the result of people banding together, combining effective advocacy and outreach with meaningful incentives and thoughtful regulations.

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318 Michael Mintz, “Save Chin’s Kitchen Vintage Neon,” GoFundMe website, September 21, 2017, [www.gofundme.com/f/save-chins-kitchen-vintage-neon](https://www.gofundme.com/f/save-chins-kitchen-vintage-neon) (accessed January 8, 2020).

*a. Local Advocacy and Outreach Issues*

- Portland's local preservation nonprofit, AHC, while engaged in meaningful work, has not made neon sign preservation a priority. As a result, much of the advocacy and outreach surrounding neon signs is done by passionate but isolated individuals using blogs, social media, and crowdfunding.
- There is no unified voice for neon preservation in Portland, and many of the city's advocates are only loosely connected to one another. In the same way a union harnesses the collective influence of a group, a unified advocacy front can turn an issue from one of scattered passion into a mobilized force to be taken seriously. It appears that such a movement is growing in Portland with the founding of PDX Neon, which is still in its infancy.

Current neon sign preservation efforts in Portland are scattered. Historic resource protections help some prominent signs but leave many others unrecognized. Sign code language is generally friendly to neon but still places a number of barriers in front of many kinds of sign restoration and rehabilitation. Design guidelines offer strong encouragement for neon in some areas but are silent in many others, and many signs don't even have to encounter the guidelines at all. All of this regulation is tied to planning documents, and the most well-intentioned of these related to neon has not yet proven effective. These regulations are assisted by a single grant opportunity that can provide an important boost to many signs but is not available to many others. Advocacy and outreach to encourage a culture of neon sign preservation is widespread but scattered.

There is excellent work being done for neon signs in Portland, however. The city has shown ample precedent and understanding of the value of neon by purchasing the city's most prominent sign and turning it into a true icon. Some signs have historic resource protections, and all benefit from a development code that is friendlier than most. Many design guidelines strongly encourage neon and encourage innovative approaches in specific areas. The city's storefront grant program has been influential in fixing many neon signs, and the community seems to value neon and stand behind it as an important element of the city. What is missing is a unified, comprehensive, best practice approach to bring these strains together in a way that creates lasting change.

## CHAPTER 5

### NATIONAL NEON SIGN PRESERVATION BEST PRACTICES SURVEY AND ASSESSMENT

*“Preserving historic signs is not always easy. But the intrinsic merit of many signs, as well as their contribution to the overall character of a place, make the effort worthwhile.”*

*- Michael J. Auer, NPS Preservation Brief 25: The Preservation of Historic Signs<sup>319</sup>*

Cities and nonprofits nationwide are beginning to recognize the importance of preserving their old neon signs and are implementing a variety of unique approaches. These approaches center on either regulations, incentives, advocacy and outreach, or a combination approach. Despite similarities, no two places employ the exact same strategy. Each municipality or organization has crafted a set of policies and/or programs aimed at meeting their unique needs. All are united by a desire to creatively use the tools available to them to ensure that their neon signs have every opportunity to shine bright long into the future. By looking briefly but thoughtfully at a breadth of examples rather than a narrow few, this paper seeks to show the variety of innovative solutions that exist for preserving neon signs and identify best practices that can have application to Portland, or any city interested in preserving neon signs.

The cities examined range geographically from Florida to California and chronologically from the earliest programs in the 1980s to brand new policies just implemented this year. The majority of examples studied, however, were implemented over the last 20 years and are located west of the Mississippi River. Cities in the American West have generally been leaders in neon sign preservation, and efforts have greatly expanded in the last decade, accounting for this focus. This is not meant to be a comprehensive list of every neon sign preservation effort in the country.<sup>320</sup> Rather, it is meant as a representative sample derived from a review of the literature and recommendations from neon experts, the

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<sup>319</sup> Auer, *The Preservation of Historic Signs*.

<sup>320</sup> Such a survey would be an excellent area for a future research.

National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Preservation Leadership Forum members, and the Historic Preservation Professionals Facebook group.<sup>321</sup>

This chapter is broken into sections based on the various tools of sign preservation – regulations, incentives, advocacy and outreach, or a combination approach. These are somewhat artificial categories, however, and a certain amount of bleed exists in each one. In addition, the examples chosen are meant to show a breadth of options, and some cities profiled may have sign preservation efforts that are not discussed. Following each example, I have identified key points that hold some potential for applicability to Portland. Where such information was available, I have tried to analyze how successful each program has been in meeting its goals. However, information concerning the effectiveness of programs was often unavailable and in some cases simply not tracked. Time constraints also limited my ability to connect with program managers in every instance to provide this information. It does appear that communities that have used a combination approach that provides a regulatory framework, financial incentives, and an advocacy and outreach program in partnership with local nonprofits have experienced more success than those that utilized or emphasized only one measure. Results are summarized in Table 3.

## **A. Regulations**

Just as many cities began to implement strong sign codes beginning in the 1960s that worked to eradicate neon signs, so too has the tide begun to change in recent years as more and more cities are altering aspects of their sign code to reverse this past damage. These new alterations help create an environment that both meets modern standards and allows for special rules concerning vintage neon and other significant signs. This section focuses not on complete overhauls of sign codes but on regulations that allow qualifying geographic areas or signs to follow a set of rules that differs from the underlying code. What follows are eight examples of special sign districts, voluntary vintage sign ordinances, and survey-based vintage sign ordinances that show how regulations can be used to preserve neon signs.

### ***I. Special Districts***

Special Districts are similar to work that has already been done in Portland in the Broadway Bright Lights corridor, Chinatown, and Interstate Avenue. These two examples show that these kinds of

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<sup>321</sup> Note that Las Vegas is conspicuously absent from this conversation despite having a strong history of neon sign preservation advocacy. This choice was made because of the uniqueness of Las Vegas as a city so closely identified with tourism and neon that its efforts, though worthy and important, might be easily dismissed as relevant only to their unique situation.



special districts for neon signs can be created in a variety of ways and reinforces the good work currently underway in Portland.

*a. Albuquerque, NM*

Albuquerque, New Mexico is one of many cities traversed by the famous Route 66, a Chicago-to-Los Angeles route well-known in American lore and famous for its collection of mid-century auto-oriented neon signs. As part of its Route 66 Action Plan, Albuquerque conducted a Central Avenue Sign Inventory in 2012, identifying over 150 officially categorized historic, iconic, or new neon signs along its Route 66 corridor. The recognition of this large collection led to the creation of the Neon Design Overlay Zone to encourage the use of neon along the historic corridor by providing fee waivers and code flexibility for any new or refurbished sign with greater than 50% of the sign area in neon. Signs must be within the designated area and owners must attend a Design Review Team meeting to discuss their plans prior to approval. Restorations of existing neon signs are automatically eligible, and billboards are specifically excluded. New freestanding or projecting signs that meet these basic criteria are eligible for a 50% sign and letter size bonus up to 250 sq. ft., while building-mounted signs receive a similar 25% bonus. They also earn a height bonus, are allowed to use animation, and receive a waiver for administrative approval and sign permit application fees. Essentially, the regulation legalizes non-conforming neon signs in the area and allows for their restoration.

The regulation uses some innovative language to distinguish between legal animated neon signs and LED picture screen signs by defining an animated sign as: “A neon sign that uses changes in luminance in a sequential or radial manner to produce what appears to be movement of an element of the animated sign. Flashing of a sign or flashing by its elements that are not sequential or radial changes in luminance do not qualify as animation of a sign. Any animation should reflect historic neon animation design (lighting and/or physical movement) and not incorporate electronic sign animation.” In addition, it allows for incandescent lights and “neon-like” LED. The description provides helpful language to limit what kind of LED lighting could be allowed in neon sign restorations (though it is questionable whether even this kind of LED is appropriate): “The tubing may contain an alternative illumination technology, such as, but not limited to, light-emitting diodes (LEDs). Any non-gaseous illumination technology, such

as LEDs, must produce illumination that appears to be a continuous, uninterrupted line, similar to illumination produced by gaseous illumination technology.”<sup>322</sup>

#### KEY FEATURES

- Uses survey to identify target area. Encourages neon in that area through a Design Overlay Zone with the ability to build new neon signs that are bigger and higher than would otherwise be allowed and legalizing otherwise nonconforming existing signs.
- Incentivizes neon by waiving certain fees.

#### APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- Waiver of certain administrative fees in Portland’s already-identified neon sign zones (Interstate, Broadway, Chinatown) could encourage more neon sign restorations.

#### *b. Miami Beach, FL*

Rather than using a design overlay, Miami Beach, Florida has made amendments in their sign code to create the Lincoln Road Signage District. Section 138.41 of the Sign Code is meant to facilitate the restoration of historic facades (and their signage) and permit new signs that match the Art Deco character of the linear district. Signs are generally allowed to be bigger and more numerous within the district than would otherwise be allowed. Since the signage district is within a historic district, the historic preservation board must approve all designs as well. As in Albuquerque, the regulations legalize historic neon signs that would otherwise be nonconforming and encourage new signs to match this character. These regulations are not revolutionary but provide an example of protecting certain neon signs within the sign code itself. It is not as robust as Albuquerque’s program, however, and is not substantially different from what already exists in Portland.<sup>323</sup>

#### KEY FEATURES

- Writes special district rules directly into the code itself rather than using a design overlay.

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<sup>322</sup> City of Albuquerque, “Central Avenue Neon Sign Design Overlay Zone,” June 24, 2013, [www.cabq.gov/planning/documents/CANDOZFinal091913.pdf](http://www.cabq.gov/planning/documents/CANDOZFinal091913.pdf) (accessed December 19, 2019). Also related to neon sign preservation in Albuquerque is the donation of the Zeon Signs archive to the University of New Mexico. Two professors recently published a book on the archives entitled *The Zeon Files: Art and Design of Historic Route 66 Signs*.

<sup>323</sup> City of Miami Beach, “Code of the City of Miami Beach, Florida,” adopted July 1, 1998, last updated March 11, 2020, [https://librarystage.municode.com/fl/miami\\_beach/codes/code\\_of\\_ordinances?nodeId=SPBLADERE\\_CH138SI\\_ARTIIISPDISIRE\\_DIV1SPSIRE\\_S138-41LIROSIDI](https://librarystage.municode.com/fl/miami_beach/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=SPBLADERE_CH138SI_ARTIIISPDISIRE_DIV1SPSIRE_S138-41LIROSIDI) (accessed April 3, 2020).

## APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- Very similar to the current regulations in Portland’s Chinatown. Writing these allowances into the code itself ensures that they are part of the system itself rather than the “add-on” to the system that design guidelines represent.

Relying on Special Districts to protect existing neon signs is ultimately a weaker solution that provides important but limited benefits to signs within the districts, while leaving many potentially significant signs outside of the districts unprotected. This is where Portland sign preservation efforts are currently. Other communities are going a step further by not seeking just to protect old signs in a small area, but creating ordinances that recognize vintage signs throughout their cities.

### *II. Vintage Sign Ordinances (Voluntary)*

A relatively new strategy for preserving old neon signs in place is the development of vintage sign ordinances. These differ from one another in how signs are designated as well as what benefits are granted to designated signs. They are unified by the creation of special rules for old signs throughout a city that are written directly into zoning codes and are separate from traditional historic resource designations. Vintage Sign Ordinances create a unique classification that recognizes the unique nature of old signs. Most examples require owner consent in one form or another and reward participation with some form of allowances or promotion. These ordinances can be grouped into two categories based on how participants are primarily identified: voluntary owner registration or targeted based on a survey.<sup>324</sup>

#### *a. Tucumcari, NM*

Tucumcari, New Mexico, is another southwestern Route 66 community that has been working to protect their neon signs. Here, the main threat to old signs has not been development pressure, neglect, or challenging sign codes, but collectors. The collector market for authentic Route 66 neon has become so strong that the city was witnessing much of its roadside signage disappear to collectors offering top dollar to purchase signs directly from owners. The city has been working for some time to craft a legislative solution to help keep local signs in Tucumcari. It rejected a proposal in December 2019 that would have imposed a 160-day delay on sales of historic signs to allow the City an opportunity to match the sales price. City commissioners did not like the idea of the city taking ownership of private property, were

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<sup>324</sup> Perhaps the earliest example of this strategy was Sarasota, Florida’s 1989 Landmark Sign Ordinance, whereby businesses could designate their signs and mitigate certain code requirements. This was mentioned in Treu, *Signs, Streets, and Storefronts* (316), but I was not able to find additional information about it.

concerned about the use of City funds to purchase signs, and felt that it could subject the City to fraud resulting from fake offers to buy signs.<sup>325</sup>

Advocates did not give up, however, and a different version of the law passed 4-1 in February 2020 as the Landmark Historic Sign Ordinance. Many other vintage sign ordinances offer special code allowances to designated signs, but Tucumcari has taken a different approach. Co-drafted by Johnnie Meier of the New Mexico Route 66 Association, the ordinance requires business owners to apply for their sign to be designated and rewards them with tourism promotion and a plaque. Says Meier, “we can just sit in our lawn chairs and watch our history and our heritage and our culture be hauled away, or we can get proactive.” Protection for designated signs is through a 90-day sale or demolition delay, during which time the City works to come up with preservation solutions such as museums or locating a private local buyer. Penalties for selling or demolishing a designated sign without a permit are a \$5,000 fine or up to 90 days in jail.<sup>326</sup> Since it is brand new, it remains to be seen if the “carrots” of tourism promotion and a plaque will entice owners to participate and if the demolition delay scheme will work to keep signs in Tucumcari. Nevertheless, it is a new tool in the sign preservation toolbox and provides a valuable “stop, look, and listen” approach that allows for creative alternatives to opportunistic sales or demolitions.

#### KEY FEATURES

- Encourages sign preservation with additional promotion and the prestige of a plaque.
- Provides strong protections in the form of sale or demolition delay and active involvement from the City to find alternatives.

#### TAKEAWAY

- Don’t give up if your first attempt at crafting legislation is unsuccessful. Likewise, do not be afraid to try new methods that are tailored to your specific situation.

#### *b. Salt Lake City, UT*

Salt Lake City (SLC), Utah is one of the most recent cities to implement a more traditional vintage sign ordinance. It and others consist of sign code amendments that essentially make qualifying

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325 Steve Hansen, “Neon Sign Ordinance Rejected,” *Quay County (NM) Sun*, December 11, 2019, [www.qcsunonline.com/story/2019/12/11/news/neon-sign-ordinance-rejected/20626.html](http://www.qcsunonline.com/story/2019/12/11/news/neon-sign-ordinance-rejected/20626.html) (accessed January 3, 2020).

326 Annalisa Pardo, “Tucumcari Passes Ordinance to Protect Route 66 Neon Signs,” KRQE website, February 26, 2020, [www.krqe.com/news/new-mexico/tucumcari-passes-ordinance-to-protect-route-66-neon-signs](http://www.krqe.com/news/new-mexico/tucumcari-passes-ordinance-to-protect-route-66-neon-signs) (accessed February 28, 2020)

old signs conforming and allow owners to do what is needed to ensure those signs remain part of the cultural landscape of the community. It removes the barrier of illegal nonconformity. Portland's sign code already gets part way to these goals by allowing maintenance and repair in many cases without requiring additional permits or variances. This works well for the preservation (in National Register treatment language) of old signs, but where the following ordinances go beyond Portland is in explicitly allowing for degrees of reuse, restoration (to an earlier appearance), reconstruction, and relocation.

Title 21A.46.125 was added to the SLC zoning code in 2018 “to promote the retention, restoration, reuse, and reinstatement of nonconforming signs that represent important elements of Salt Lake City's heritage and enhance the character of a corridor, neighborhood, or the community at large.” Owners apply for “vintage sign” status – either at the time they would like to modify a sign by changing certain elements, reinstating it, or relocating it – or in anticipation of a desire to do so in the future. If vintage sign status is granted, the sign is exempt from maximum size limits. Vintage sign status also allows certain changes, including relocation, that would otherwise be illegal. It essentially creates a special set of rules for designated signs that is separate from the base sign code.

An owner seeking designation must show drawings or photographs of the current sign, drawings of proposed changes, historic drawings or photographs, demonstrate that the proposal meets certain criteria (it is not a billboard, it retains or re-establishes historic character, and it meets a set of sub-criteria), and go through a public process. To meet the sub-criteria requirements, the proposal must meet four of these six qualifiers: the sign was designed for the site; features unique graphics; enhances the identity of the neighborhood; is characteristic of its period; is integral to the building; or demonstrates craftsmanship. Qualifying signs can then be relocated within the same site, be relocated to a business' new site if it is within the same district, or be relocated for public art in certain areas. It can also be modified if it keeps the same shape, size, typography, use of color, illustrative elements, character of illumination, and character of animation. Finally, the sign can be restored or re-created and re-instated at its original site.<sup>327</sup> SLC's vintage sign ordinance, while not openly encouraging or incentivizing specific action, removes hurdles that may exist for those who desire to protect their old neon signs and ensures that the sign code allows for their continued survival, relevance, and even reconstruction.

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327 Salt Lake City, City Code, last updated December 3, 2019, available at [www.sterlingcodifiers.com/codebook/index.php?book\\_id=672](http://www.sterlingcodifiers.com/codebook/index.php?book_id=672) (accessed February 28, 2020).

## KEY FEATURES

- Allows and provides guidelines for adaptive reuse, reinstatement, and relocation of old signs that would otherwise be illegal.

## APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- SLC's rules provide an excellent template to legalize the retention of significant neon signs in whatever way makes the most sense to the situation without effecting the underlying sign code. It represents best practice for how code adjustments can ensure that the sign code is never the reason old neon signs do not survive. The code language is included here as Appendix E.

### *c. Nashville, TN*

In 2011, Nashville, Tennessee, added a special category of “Landmark Signs” to their zoning code, recognizing that many signs “are landmarks in themselves, almost without regard for the building to which they are attached, or the property on which they stand.” Its distinguishing feature is the breakdown of designated signs into three categories: historic, vintage, and replica. “Historic Signs” must be 50 years old and exemplify the cultural, architectural, or commercial history of the city. “Vintage Signs” must be between 25 and 50 years old and iconic and culturally significant. “Replica Signs” must be exact reproductions of historic signs that have been lost. A set of criteria for significance governs designation. Once designated, signs are exempt from base sign code regulations.<sup>328</sup> The specifics of this ordinance were not examined in depth, but the value lies in the unique breakdown of sign types. This breakdown allows for a range of possibilities for recognizing different levels of significance and creating different protections based on them, replica signs, and the continual addition of signs to the list.

## KEY FEATURES

- Creating categories of designated vintage signs allows for different levels of protection and recognizes different reasons why a sign could be a landmark. By tying these categories to age, it does not lock recognition into a certain date and allows for important newer signs to continually be added to the list.

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328 Cagasan, “A Methodology for Preserving Las Vegas Neon Electric Displays.”

## APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- This kind of a breakdown could be a valuable way for Portland to recognize both currently historic neon signs and those that may become iconic in the future and provide different levels of protection if desired. It would also allow for reproductions of lost signs without extra requirements.

### *d. Miami, FL*

Miami, Florida, also recognizes the value of its historic signs and protects them under Title 23-6.4 by allowing historic signs to be designated as such by a review board when certain criteria are met. These criteria include: 1) association with historic figures, events, or places; 2) significance related to the product or business advertised; 3) reflection of the history of the building or historic district; 4) characteristic of a period; 5) integral to the building's design; 6) outstanding example of signmaking art; 7) popular recognition as a community focal point; and/or 8) defines the character of a district (as in theater districts or motel strips). There is no set number of these criteria which must be met for approval. Designated signs are permitted "to remain and to be repaired, restored, structurally altered, reconstructed, or relocated" through a public variance process.<sup>329</sup> Along with its sweeping allowance for the various ways historic signs might be saved, Miami's system is admirable for its lack of an age requirement and its inclusion of a sign's local popularity and role in placemaking as qualifying criteria (Criteria 7 and 8). By not insisting signs be a certain age and allowing a community's love for a sign or its role in creating a cohesive environment to warrant designation, Miami admirably breaks from the history/architecture focus of traditional preservation practice and provides an avenue for the values of the general public to be heard. In this way, a more "common" neon sign without particular distinction to history or architecture that is nonetheless valuable to the local community can earn protection. Criteria 8 also provides an excellent route into the possibility of neon sign districts that could be used to protect the cohesion of a neighborhood characterized by neon signs, even if each individual sign might not otherwise earn designation on its own.

Miami specifically recognizes the value of its mid-century neon sign collection in the MiMo (Miami Modern) historic district along Biscayne Boulevard. Here design guidelines are used to allow the restoration of the road's many distinctive motel signs and encourage sensitive new design. The guidelines

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<sup>329</sup> City of Miami, "Code of Ordinances," adopted March 20, 1997, last updated March 23, 2020, [https://library.municode.com/fl/miami/codes/code\\_of\\_ordinances?nodeId=10933](https://library.municode.com/fl/miami/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=10933) (accessed April 13, 2020).

state that “the signage should reflect the sense of drama, flamboyance, and prominence which they originally had” but does not make any special allowances and limits signs to conformity with existing code guidelines unless they have been designated historic. It discourages interior-lit cabinet signs and encourages channel letters. It also explicitly notes that motels in the MiMo style when neon was popular should be allowed to repair and restore their signs.<sup>330</sup> These guidelines provide a nice complement to the historic sign designation process that recognizes the importance of historic signs in a specific area and encourages even un-designated signs in the area to match the neon character of their surrounds.

#### KEY FEATURES

- Historic sign designation resulting in allowances for repair, restoration, alteration, reconstruction, or relocation of historic signs.
- Designation is not dependent on a certain age requirement.
- Unique criteria for sign designation include recognition as a community focal point and role in defining the character of a district.

#### TAKEAWAYS

- Signs do not need to be a certain level of “old” to be worth protecting.
- Local value for a sign can be reason enough to save it. The same is true for signs that may lack individual distinction but lend themselves to the character of a neighborhood that would suffer in their loss.

#### APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- Miami’s precedent of not tying significance for designation strictly to traditional determinants like age, architecture, and history allows for a much wider variety of signs to be protected, including those that matter to communities or help define neighborhoods. Creating a special class

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330 City of Miami Historic and Environmental Preservation Board, “A Resolution of the City of Miami Historic and Environmental Preservation Board Approving and Adopting the Attached MiMo (Miami Modern) / Biscayne Boulevard Design Guidelines,” June 2, 2009, [www.historicpreservationmiami.com/pdfs/MiMoHistoricGuidelines.pdf](http://www.historicpreservationmiami.com/pdfs/MiMoHistoricGuidelines.pdf) (accessed March 4, 2020).



of historic signs based on the Key Features of Miami’s program would go a long way toward protecting *all* the signs that matter to Portlanders.

### ***III. Vintage Sign Ordinances (Survey-Based)***

Each of the above vintage sign ordinances require owners to voluntarily go through a process to designate their signs. Ideally, such a system would entice owners who would like to preserve or re-use their signs to do so through special allowances and remove any hurdles the base code may place in their way. This system, does not, however, provide comprehensive coverage of all the potentially significant signs in a city and relies on the self-identification and initiative of individual owners. An alternative method for protecting old neon signs is to use a survey to identify those signs that are determined eligible and designate them before they are in danger. This is the tactic taken by the two examples that follow and ultimately provides a more thorough and proactive system for protecting neon signs. In many ways, these efforts are not unlike those undertaken in Albuquerque, except that they apply citywide and not just to a specific district.<sup>331</sup>

#### ***a. St. Petersburg, FL***

The language used to justify St. Petersburg, Florida’s Signs of Historic Significance program nicely explains the purpose of vintage sign ordinances: “Since policies regulating the size and placement of business signs have changed over the years, some of St. Petersburg’s most unique and recognizable signs have become nonconforming. In order to allow and encourage the continued use, maintenance, and preservation of these signs, the City has adopted regulations pertaining to Signs of Historic Significance.”<sup>332</sup> Similar to other ordinances described, St. Petersburg has made specific changes to code language that allow historic signs to remain in place by exempting certain signs from size, height, and location restrictions; allows repair, restoration, re-use, re-construction, or re-location based on any iteration of the sign more than 40 years old; and does not count them toward site allowances. Listing does not stop owners from altering or removing their signs, but a 30-day delay is placed on any request to

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<sup>331</sup> It should be mentioned that the first neon sign survey was likely the 1986 “Neon in Nevada: A Survey of Contemporary and Historic Neon Signs in Nevada,” produced by the SHPO, state historical society, and Sierra Nevada Museum of Art. Additional surveys undertaken in Las Vegas include a 2002 UNLV-led neon sign inventory and online gallery of the Strip that was updated in 2018, and the 2008 Nevada State/Neon Boneyard Historic Resource Survey (Sarah Buchanan, “Community-Based Archives and Education: Teaching Outside the (Hollinger) Box” [Los Angeles: UCLA, Archival Education and Research Institute, July 2011], [https://aeri.gseis.ucla.edu/AERI%202011%20Posters/aeri11\\_SB.pdf](https://aeri.gseis.ucla.edu/AERI%202011%20Posters/aeri11_SB.pdf), accessed March 3, 2020). These are not included in the main text because of the unique nature of neon to Las Vegas.

<sup>332</sup> City of St. Petersburg, “Historic Signs,” City of St. Petersburg website, August 23, 2019, [www.stpete.org/history\\_and\\_preservation/historic\\_signs.php](http://www.stpete.org/history_and_preservation/historic_signs.php) (accessed March 3, 2020).

remove a sign. It is meant to preserve historic character and sense of place, prevent inappropriate reuse of signs while ensuring good maintenance, prevent loss of signs by providing a means for their retention, and allow owners the flexibility to preserve their signs.

The program started in 2012 and initially asked owners to go through a similar self-identification process as described above. While businesses can still nominate their own signs, a 2016 survey by the Community Planning and Preservation Commission proactively identified signs in the city that were eligible. While not meant to be comprehensive, the survey generated a list of many significant signs and included a report and historic context (all easily accessible online) that added many signs to the program. It also identified altered and removed signs with the potential for restoration and reconstruction. Included in the survey were guidelines for determining why different kinds of signs may achieve significance: significant neon signs should use lettering to create a distinctive logo; feature multiple colors of tubing; combine lettering and graphics to create memorable and eye-catching displays; or consist of enamel signboards enhanced and highlighted by neon tubing. It also notes that alterations should preserve character-defining features including lettering style, size, and color. All signs must be more than 40 years old, examples of their era, and feature historic materials and illumination style. They must be structurally safe; retain integrity or be able to be restored; and exemplify heritage, have extraordinary aesthetic qualities, or be a rare or significant example. Any kind of old sign is eligible (detached, projecting, roof, painted, fascia).<sup>333</sup> The full ordinance is included here as Appendix F.

The strategy is akin to preventive medicine. It removes the burden from property owners to nominate a sign themselves and go through a designation process when they need the allowances that come with designation but are also likely laden with numerous other regulatory hurdles relative to the project. By identifying and listing signs in advance, the city removes uncertainty from future projects. Further, because it is an inventory that comes only with a 30-day removal delay rather than a designation with land-use restrictions, the program allows signs to be directly nominated by city staff without the need for explicit owner consent.

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<sup>333</sup> City of St. Petersburg, City Code §16.40.120.13: “Signs of Historic Significance,” ord. no. 371-H, § 1, 6-13-2019, [https://library.municode.com/fl/st.\\_petersburg/codes/code\\_of\\_ordinances?nodeId=PTIISTPECO\\_CH16LADERE\\_S16.40.120SICO\\_6.40.120.13IHISI](https://library.municode.com/fl/st._petersburg/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=PTIISTPECO_CH16LADERE_S16.40.120SICO_6.40.120.13IHISI) (accessed March 3, 2020).

## KEY FEATURES

- Built on a strong existing historic sign program by proactively seeking out potentially significant signs through a survey.
- Eschews the traditional 50-year rule for 40 years instead to capture more resources.
- Encourages restoration by not counting listed signs toward total sign allowances.
- Does not exclude certain sign types such as rooftop or freestanding.

## APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- A proactive survey may be one of the most valuable things Portland could do to protect its signs. By identifying significant signs and removing code barriers to their continued use before they are in danger, the City could remove the onus on property owners to nominate themselves and work through a potentially cumbersome designation process while in the throes of a project. Even if owners were required to consent to their sign's addition to the inventory and the removal delay did not exist, the removal of code barriers to the preservation of a curated set of signs would be incredibly valuable.

### *b. Burbank, CA*

Burbank, California, part of the Los Angeles metro area, used an \$18,000 2014 Certified Local Government grant to conduct a historic sign survey and draft a new ordinance to protect identified signs. Known as the Burbank Historic Sign Program, the windshield survey not only identifies signs but provided a historic context for them as well. The ordinance was passed the following year and requires written owner consent before listing. Once listed, owners can remove the listing under certain circumstances. They can also demolish a listed sign if it presents a safety issue. Benefits for listed signs include a waiver of sign permit fees for work, the ability to defer and lessen building permit fees by 10%, and a 10% increase in maximum sign area allowed on a property with the historic sign not counting toward the total. New signage on a site must be reviewed to ensure it does not conflict with the historic sign.<sup>334</sup> These benefits are generally weaker than the blanket allowances provided in other examples but

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<sup>334</sup> Lannette Marie Schwartz, "Conserving Historic Commercial Signs in Hollywood, California," (master's thesis, University of Southern California, 2016).

do provide the added bonus of small financial incentives. The specifics of this ordinance were not examined in depth, but its value is as an alternative model for survey-based vintage sign ordinances that provides for owner consent and unique benefits.

#### KEY FEATURES

- Identifies and lists historic signs but requires owner consent and allows owners to remove listing under certain conditions.

#### APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- Because it requires owner consent prior to listing, Burbank's model may be easier to implement in Portland than St. Petersburg's, given Oregon's current owner consent rules.

### **B. Incentives**

Incentives can come in many forms. Many of the allowances described above, such as size bonuses, fee waivers, or a plaque, are forms of regulatory incentives. For clarity, however, incentives for the purposes of this paper focus largely on financial incentives, primarily grants. Local grant programs encouraging neon preservation or restoration are rare as standalone entities. My research did not turn up any local grants aimed directly at neon sign preservation, just like it did not reveal any such grants at the state or national level. What does exist in many locations are storefront improvement grants like Prosper Portland's PIP grant. There was also one specific sign grant program identified (sponsored by a large corporation), but it is covered in the "Combination Approaches" section because the city, Knoxville, also has a vintage sign ordinance. The dearth of financial incentives specific to sign conservation may be because neon sign preservation is seen as too specific a target for a grant program. It may also rarely be seen without code adjustments because a grant to fix a sign does no good if a sign is not legally allowed to be fixed. Financial incentives are a critical tool, however, and when used in conjunction with sign codes that encourage preservation and advocacy that makes preservation desirable, they can be the tipping point that makes neon sign preservation not just allowable and desirable, but also financially viable. A grant program with an outsized influence on neon signs that shows the ripple effect that grants can have is the Route 66 Corridor Cost-Share Grant Program, and it is the focus of this section.

#### ***I. Route 66 Corridor Cost-Share Grant Program***

The Route 66 Corridor Cost-Share Grant Program (Rt66 Grant) was a national preservation incentive funded by the NPS. After almost 20 years of great success, this funding source recently sunset, and no new grants are currently being distributed. Despite these differences from other examples in this chapter, however, it is appropriate to discuss the Route 66 Grant here because it has been used so

effectively by so many communities along Route 66 to not only conserve a large number of neon signs, but it has also been leveraged into meaningful statewide initiatives. The program thus serves as a best practice for what an effective grant program that encourages neon sign conservation can look like.

Neon signage is an important character-defining feature of Route 66, a 2,500-mile ribbon of road crossing eight states from Illinois to California. The change wrought on many formerly busy Route 66 communities when the Interstate system bypassed them left many of these neon signs in a state of decay, however. “Neon signs were the candy-colored beacons that attracted tourists...Over the years, these classic signs have become icons and achieved recognition as outstanding examples of American folk art. However, many of these once-beautiful signs have also been torn down, replaced, or gone dark.”<sup>335</sup> The Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program is a unique entity housed within the National Trails program of the NPS and is the federal government’s primary method for protecting and interpreting Route 66.

The main initiative of the program is the Rt66 Grant, funded as a line item in the NPS budget every year from 2003 to 2019 in amounts ranging from \$90,000-\$150,000. The seed grants required a 1:1 match for revitalization projects on or within view of the road. There were no restrictions on who could apply, and while neon sign conservation was not the only work the grant could be used for, it proved a popular option. All work was required to follow SOI Standards, and guidelines dictated that signs had to be in their original location. Wording modifications were allowed if colors and lettering style were kept, an important precedent set by the federal government allowing for neon sign rehabilitation. Money could not be used, however, for new or reproduction signs. This decision was made to ensure that the program prioritized historic fabric. In a rare decision by NPS, this grant was also not tied to NRHP listing or eligibility. While progress has been made on listing more signs in the Register since the grant’s inception, limiting awards to only those signs whose owners or advocates had the time and/or financial resources to list their sign on the Register would have severely limited to number of signs that could benefit from the program. It would also have been misaligned with the grant’s intention as a “seed” to help improve signs rather than a recognition of signs already deemed important. Kaisa Barthuli, the NPS program coordinator, noted that SHPOs were not always happy with this decision. Admirably, NPS recognized the limits of traditional preservation tools to effectively preserve significant signage and developed the Grant as an alternative method that turned out to be very effective.

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335 Kaisa Barthuli, “Preserving Route 66 Historic Signs,” National Park Service Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program website, <https://ncptt.nps.gov/rt66/resource-center/how-to-preserve-your/signs> (accessed December 17, 2019).

By the time of its sunset last year, 35 projects had received grants from \$3,000 to \$50,000 to conserve 40 signs. All but two of these projects involved neon. Most recipients were private businesses, but some nonprofits and municipalities received grants as well. While last year was the final call for grant applications, the Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program still exists to manage existing grants and provide technical assistance, and an ongoing discussion is under way to evaluate the success of the program and address ongoing challenges along the route. One option under consideration is the designation of Route 66 as a National Historic Trail. A separate organization, the Route 66 Road Ahead Partnership, brings together nonprofit route advocates and recently created a task force specific to sign preservation. They have identified the high cost of repairs and competition from LEDs as the biggest current threats to neon along the route.<sup>336</sup>

While many grant recipients used funds simply to conserve individual signs, the ripple effect of these efforts has been wide. The grant was tied closely to Albuquerque's survey and DOZ efforts (discussed earlier) and kickstarted years of work in Tulsa that have led to it becoming a national leader in neon sign preservation (discussed later in this chapter). It also led to important nonprofit efforts in New Mexico and Missouri to encourage neon sign preservation there. This section follows the trail of that impact.

#### KEY FEATURES

- Open to anyone to apply.
- Wording modifications allowed.
- Not limited to National Register properties.

#### TAKEAWAYS

- The NPS, the nation's authority on preservation practice, allowed changes to wording for grant recipient signs. This precedent should be followed and similar changes allowed in local regulations.

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<sup>336</sup> Kaisa Barthuli, telephone conversation with the author, January 8, 2020.

## APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- Portland should follow federal precedent and allow wording changes (rehabilitation) to old signs that retain character-defining features like color, lettering style, and illumination method.<sup>337</sup>

### *a. New Mexico Route 66 Association*

New Mexico has a strong history of working to protect its neon sign heritage along Route 66 and has shown the power of leveraging regulations, incentives, and advocacy and outreach together for stronger impact. A 2002 survey led first to a thematic listing of 27 “Neon Signs Along Route 66 in New Mexico” in the State Register of Cultural Properties. This was later submitted to the NRHP as an MPS, still the only one of its kind, later that year.<sup>338</sup> The inventory helped the state understand the value of what it had, and it took action by applying for and receiving a \$50,000 Rt66 Grant in 2003 (the first year they were available) that was used to conserve nine neon signs. Three of these were in Tucumcari, showing another connecting point between the grant (awarded 17 years ago) and its ripple effect on legislation today. As an example of the flexibility that allowed the grant to be useful to more businesses, the Paradise Motel sign was allowed to change the neon word “pool” on their sign to “open” because the motel no longer had a pool.

The effort was led by Elmo Baca at the SHPO who envisioned a program to recognize the value of vintage neon signs and their importance to the Route 66 story, a valuable example of leadership coming from the “top down” within the preservation establishment. The New Mexico Route 66 Association won the bid to execute the project and developed criteria for deciding which signs would be repaired. Local businesses were reportedly nervous at first about involvement from the federal government in their business as well as coming up with the required match. A local PBS documentary on the process helped spread awareness and build support, and an additional grant was received later to restore architectural neon along the route. The result of the efforts was a pride in ownership for local businesses, renewed community pride, and renewed interest among signmakers in contributing to the continuing story of Route 66.<sup>339</sup>

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337 As a matter of First Amendment protections, Portland already does not regulate sign content. My recommendation is meant to be a guiding principle of the City’s sign preservation philosophy, however, and is most relevant to determining what kinds of changes would be allowed to designated historic signs. It is a recommendation for preservation, rather than Constitutional, law.

338 David Kammer, “Neon Signs Along Route 66 in New Mexico,” National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, December 30, 2002, available at [www.cabq.gov/planning/documents/NeonSignsAlongRoute66inNewMexico.pdf](http://www.cabq.gov/planning/documents/NeonSignsAlongRoute66inNewMexico.pdf) (accessed February 6, 2020).

339 Johnnie V., “2003 Route 66 Neon Restoration.”

## KEY FEATURES

- Efforts were led by SHPO in partnership with a nonprofit.
- The project combined a survey, local thematic listing, National Register MPS, and large grant to understand, recognize, and protect neon signs in the state.

## TAKEAWAYS

- Conservation efforts are more effective if momentum builds. A survey is of little use if nothing comes of it but can be powerful if used to identify significant signs and develop targeted guidelines that can then inform funding decisions. Partnerships with nonprofits can increase impact even more, involve the public, and save public resources.

## APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- Portland has sufficient neon signage to warrant a survey and context, which it can use to leverage further support. Local or national MPS-style documentation may be appropriate.

### *b. New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance*

Compounding the effects of the SHPO and Route 66 Association was the concurrent work of the statewide preservation nonprofit, New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance, which also received a Rt66 Grant to develop the “Saving New Mexico’s Route 66 Historic Signs” brochure and draft a model sign ordinance. The brochure was an outreach effort made possible by the Rt66 Grant and had goals very similar to my paper, laying out a system of best practices. It explicitly calls out sign ordinances that ignore or exclude neon as being directly responsible for the loss of signs. It also makes a case, in everyday language that people can understand, for why neon is significant, how it can serve as good placemaking, and why changing sign wording for new businesses ought to be allowable. The argument insists that it is not enough for signs to be vested with legal nonconforming status: they must be allowed to be adapted for new uses as well. Finally, it sets up the basic steps for conducting a neon sign survey: determining what constitutes significance; surveying resources to find which ones meet the criteria; and applying the criteria to list signs.<sup>340</sup> This brochure is included here as Appendix G.

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340 New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance, “Saving New Mexico’s Route 66 Historic Signs,” (brochure., c. 2003), <https://ncptt.nps.gov/rt66/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/FinalBrochure.pdf> (accessed December 17, 2019).



While the other efforts were focused strictly on signs along Route 66, the model historic sign ordinance sought to encourage sign preservation statewide by encouraging overlay districts in which signs could be legally preserved, restored, or replaced. Key features include requirements for special permits and a letter of appropriateness from a commission before any old sign within the zone could be replaced, and exemptions from underlying code requirements for historic signs within the zone. Interestingly, the model ordinance does not appear to allow for animated signs and continues the outdated requirement to remove illegal signs within a certain time period. Neither does it allow for the protection of signs citywide, instead limiting allowances to certain zones.<sup>341</sup> While not perfect, the model ordinance is a valuable early effort to propose code that recognizes the value of old signs. Perhaps most importantly, a model ordinance provides a replicable template and removes some of the legwork involved in cities crafting code from scratch. A version of this is what was implemented almost 10 years later in Albuquerque.

#### KEY FEATURES

- Outreach brochure was written in plain language with lots of visuals to take a complex issue and make it understandable.

#### APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- A brochure explaining why neon is worth saving may be a valuable outreach tool to business owners and could be created by a local nonprofit.

#### *c. Route 66 Association of Missouri*

Directly inspired by the work that had been accomplished in New Mexico, the Route 66 Association of Missouri formed a Neon Heritage Preservation Committee in 2006 with the goals of finding a home for already removed signs the organization owned and restoring inactive signs along the route *in situ*. This four-person committee began by reaching out to the owners of a doughnut shop whose neon sign had been damaged in a windstorm and worked with them to apply for a Rt66 Grant. The success of this application led to the Association making these efforts a key part of their mission, and they began working with more businesses to apply for a Rt66 Grant to restore a different sign every year. The efforts have restored multiple signs that have built community pride and even garnered a Best of St. Louis

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341 New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance, “Model Historic Sign Ordinance,” <https://ncptt.nps.gov/rt66/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/SignReg.pdf> (accessed December 17, 2019).

award in 2013. One St. Louis sign that received a grant became an official County Landmark as well.<sup>342</sup> These efforts show the cascading impact actions can have, from a single survey in New Mexico to grants, a model ordinance, and incentive-based outreach programs across the country. Missouri’s work also shows the impact that can be made when an organization prioritizes helping businesses get the resources they need to preserve their signs. Even seemingly small grants can have a big impact.

#### TAKEAWAYS

- Sometimes businesses need a push to apply for funding to restore their significant sign. An established program led by a nonprofit can help facilitate this.

#### APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- A local nonprofit could make it a priority to work with sign owners to help them work through the process of applying for a Prosper Portland PIP grant or other funding opportunity.

### C. Advocacy and Outreach

Advocacy and outreach by nonprofits, individuals, or even cities themselves to promote an appreciation for neon signs among owners, policymakers, and the general public plays an important role in pushing the issue of neon preservation forward and is often the jumpstart that leads to regulations or incentives. Before time and resources are put into crafting new code, surveying or designating historic signs, crafting protections, or offering financial incentives, there must be an awareness that neon signs exist, are significant, and are worth saving. This kind of advocacy played a part in every effort already discussed and those to follow, but this chapter focuses on cities where advocacy and outreach have been the primary methods for neon preservation. Advocacy and outreach can be defined in many ways, and their tactics and methods are as diverse as their implementers. Advocacy implies grassroots activism, and outreach implies the engagement and mobilization of a population, but the boundaries are slippery. I use “advocacy and outreach” as an encompassing term to describe interventions that foster a culture of appreciation for neon signs and an understanding of their importance to a community. This chapter looks at two general categories of sign preservation I am classifying as advocacy and outreach: inspiration-oriented DIY conservation and awareness building.

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342 Jim Thole, “Neon Preservation,” Route 66 Association of Missouri website, [http://missouri66.org/?page\\_id=1665](http://missouri66.org/?page_id=1665) (accessed December 17, 2019).

## *I. Inspiration-Oriented DIY Conservation*

Inspiration-oriented do-it-yourself (DIY) conservation (IODC) is a time and labor-intensive method for preserving signs, but when the resources are available it is also the one that provides the most control and assurance of success. What I term IODC does not rely on designating signs in one way or another, altering codes to allow for or encourage particular behaviors, or incentivizing restoration through grants (i.e. encouraging others to do the work). Instead, it is when an individual, organization, or government takes a DIY approach and fixes signs themselves with the intention of inspiring others to do the same and fostering sense of place and economic development in the process. Sign museums and sign parks, as discussed earlier, continue to appear nationwide and represent the most common method of IODC today. These entities are important preservation tools that provide a home for removed signs and can foster wide appreciation for neon signs when interpretation helps the public learn more about them, understand their value, and see them treated as art and/or cultural artifacts. These methods, however, do not usually preserve signs in place. Another less common strain of IODC sees a concerted effort to restore signs where they are, often explicitly justified as an economic revitalization tool. This strategy is based on the ideas that restored neon signs act as stimuli in an area and that actually seeing the effects of restoration firsthand leads to a desire to replicate the efforts elsewhere. The following two examples adhere to this school of thought.

### *a. Los Angeles, CA*

One of the earliest and most successful sign preservation efforts ever undertaken in the United States was Los Angeles, California's Living Urban Museum of Electric Neon Signs (LUMENS) Project. Noted in 1999 by the *Los Angeles Times* as "one of the most imaginative and cost-effective redevelopment schemes in Los Angeles history," the project was based on the premise that "sometimes, urban renewal can be as simple as the relighting of a neon sign...lights that recover the past and point to an equally bright urban future."<sup>343</sup> LUMENS, which ran on and off from 1986 to 2003, used the restoration of neon signs as public art for the purpose of economic revitalization. It was envisioned as an outreach tool, as its creator, Adolfo V. Nodal, relates in an email: "Our goal had always been to make the signs important to the city and achieve community support for them."<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Kevin Star, "Landscape Electric," *Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 1999, [www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1999-jul-04-op-52802-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1999-jul-04-op-52802-story.html) (accessed March 4, 2020).

<sup>344</sup> Adolfo Nodal, email exchanges, March 24 and 31, 2020.

Many of LA's neon signs had been dark for half a century after they were turned off during WWII for fear of Japanese attacks. Public servant, writer, and curator Adolfo Nodal recognized the power restoring these abandoned neon signs as public art could have in revitalizing depressed neighborhoods, increasing economic activity, and building community pride. Nodal has a deep track record with neon, having also commissioned neon artworks in Washington, DC, and supervised the restoration of Charles Moore's neon-outlined Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans.<sup>345</sup>

His neon sign work in Los Angeles began in 1986, long before the current resurgence of the city's downtown or resuscitated popularity of neon sign preservation. These efforts focused on the MacArthur Park neighborhood and began with the Westlake Theatre sign. Seven additional historic neon signs were restored in the neighborhood over the next few years as part of what was then called the Los Angeles Historic Neon Sign Restoration Program. At the time, Nodal was the Director of both the MacArthur Park Public Art Program and the local Exhibition Center at Otis Parsons Art School, and the project was part of his work with these organizations.<sup>346</sup> The program was a partnership between the school, the City Community Development Department, and the local city councilor. It was so successful that Nodal published a book in 1989, *How the Arts Made a Difference (The MacArthur Park Public Art Program)*, detailing the effect that the signs and other public arts projects had in the neighborhood.

Nodal moved briefly to New Orleans in 1988 but returned less than a year later as the head of the City's Cultural Affairs Department. In this role, he worked for years to build support for expanding the neon sign restoration program he had begun in MacArthur Park. This work included a survey over the course of five years to identify areas of the city that had developed from the 1920s through the 1940s and to find the signs within these areas in need of restoration. Efforts focused on the Wilshire Corridor, Hollywood, and Downtown. The windshield survey also involved helicopters, and some signs were even discovered that had simply been laid down on roofs waiting for better days. Most of the identified signs were for theaters or apartment buildings that were either still serving their original function (or something close to it) or had simply been left up over the years; almost none were for active retail stores.<sup>347</sup> Along with theater marquees and blade signs, most of these signs were on rooftops, a plentiful resource in Los Angeles and one that was easily seen by freeway drivers who might be enticed by the restorations to venture off the highway and see what was happening for themselves.

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345 Nodal and Webb, "A Guide to Neon Lights along the Wilshire Corridor."

346 The school was relocated to the Westchester neighborhood and renamed Otis College of Art and Design in the 1990s.

347 Adolfo Nodal, email exchanges.

In 1996, the re-branded LUMENS Project was reborn as a program of the Cultural Affairs Department in partnership with the City's Community Redevelopment Agency, Community Development Department, and local City Councilor, and the "campaign to raise funds and cajole owners to restore and relight their rooftop signs" began.<sup>348</sup> This new push pulled in \$300,000 from each partner to fund the restoration of signs along what came to be known as the Historic Wilshire Neon Corridor.<sup>349</sup> Wilshire was the most concentrated area of original Art Deco neon signs in the world with 150 signs looming over the corridor from downtown west.<sup>350</sup> The LUMENS Project paid for restorations in their entirety, working with generally enthusiastic property owners to develop easements on the properties that allowed the City to spend money on private property for the public good. The City would then maintain the signs for five years. Importantly, the restoration work was combined with historic designation, and most of the signs were designated local Historic Cultural Monuments or added to local Historic Preservation Overlay Zones (historic districts). There was also a strong public advocacy component to the work, garnering public interest and community support for the signs with the help of MONA and their popular neon bus tours.<sup>351</sup>

Within just three years, LUMENS had restored an astounding 40 signs and work proceeded to Hollywood and then Downtown.<sup>352</sup> By 2003 when the program ended (just eight years later), the LUMENS Project had restored a remarkable 185 neon signs – 55 in the Wilshire Corridor, 60 in Hollywood, and 70 Downtown – a number that is unprecedented relative to any other city studied for this paper.<sup>353</sup> The program ended in 2003 after Nodal left the City because Nodal says, "it was time to let it grow on its own. Our plan to re-ignite the City's love for its mid-century historic fabric was successful."<sup>354</sup> The City, through LUMENS, had successfully built a movement of support for neon signs in Los Angeles by doing the dirty work themselves. The project not only helped revitalize underserved areas, it led others to restore their neon signs too. Although some signs have fallen back into disrepair, many more, like Downtown's Bendix sign, the final project completed, have become beacons for the city.

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348 Ibid.; Nodal and Webb, "A Guide to Neon Lights along the Wilshire Corridor."

349 Schwartz, "Conserving Historic Commercial Signs in Hollywood, California."; Adolfo Nodal, email exchanges.

350 Nodal and Webb, "A Guide to Neon Lights along the Wilshire Corridor."

351 Rinaldi, *New York Neon*.

352 Star, "Landscape Electric"; Adolfo Nodal, email exchanges; Nodal and Webb, "A Guide to Neon Lights Along the Wilshire Corridor."

353 Helena Smith, "Los Angeles Neon Is Experiencing a Rebirth," Lonely Planet website, August 2, 2019, [www.lonelyplanet.com/articles/los-angeles-neon](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/articles/los-angeles-neon) (accessed March 4, 2020); Adolfo Nodal, email exchanges.

354 Adolfo Nodal, email exchanges.

LA's sheer size, number of surviving neon signs, and local neon sign museum make it a unique case in some ways. Still, the strategy of making neon sign preservation a major component of a city's urban revitalization efforts and partnering with property owners to implement an IODC strategy and designation of signs in place is replicable elsewhere. It also shows that when an individual has a vision, pursues that vision, and is able to bring other on board, the results can be incredible.

#### KEY FEATURES

- Began as public-private partnership focused on a single area and grew into a multi-year, multi-neighborhood effort with diverse partners.
- City worked with property owners to secure easements to restore abandoned neon signs and build support for them as a catalyst for economic revitalization.
- Signs for restoration were chosen based on a survey and often designated as local landmarks as part of the process.

#### TAKEAWAYS

- Economic revitalization (placemaking) is a critical value of neon signs. Cities do not always respond to arguments for historic preservation, but every city is invested in promoting economic development. The LUMENS Project shows that neon sign restoration as economic revitalization can be an incredibly effective way to protect signs.
- The incredible success of the LUMENS Project would not have been possible if the city code had mandated removing rooftop or other abandoned or deteriorated signs. They were able to be restored because they still existed after so many years of being neglected, showing that there is always hope for a sign still in place and that they should not be removed simply because they have fallen on hard times.
- When a City really embraces neon sign restoration and is willing to fund it, the impact can be enormous.

#### APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- The City of Portland has an abiding interest in promoting equity and increasing investment in traditionally underserved communities. Implementing an IODC strategy for neon signs in underserved areas of the city can preserve the culture of underserved populations, increase community pride, and encourage economic investment in areas where it is needed.

*b. Pocatello, ID*

The Old Town Pocatello Foundation, an economic development organization in the Idaho city, began its Relight the Night (RLN) initiative in 2013 and has since restored six signs and inspired or helped with the restoration of 10 more. An additional sign relighting is scheduled for June 2020. “The thing is people love these neon signs,” RLN committee chair Randy Dixon said. “We’ve identified that neon is something that is part of Pocatello’s history. So we want to ensure that we take a stance to recognize and preserve that part of history, not just for today or this next year, but for many years to come.”<sup>355</sup> “The RLN initiative intends to reverse the deterioration of these community icons – rescuing and restoring these landmarks – large or small – one by one to their former brilliance and glory as jewels of Pocatello’s city center.”<sup>356</sup> Rather than incentivizing sign preservation through grants, the RLN restores signs itself, stores removed signs for safekeeping while new locations are found, and provides technical assistance for businesses looking to preserve their own signs.

Efforts began with the Chief Theater sign and have focused on orphaned signs whose businesses no longer exist. The theater itself had just been restored in 1993 when it burned to the ground. The elaborate sign for this community icon survived, however. Twenty years later, the Foundation worked to restore the sign on its original site as an effort to revitalize downtown. The initiative generated so much excitement that RLN was created to relight other old signs around town. Requiring a “perfect storm of collaboration,”<sup>357</sup> RLN takes ownership of the signs it restores. Funds are generated by contributions to an annual Neon Street Dance event and by sending out Save Our Signs alerts inviting community members and businesses to come to the aid of struggling signs. Funding for maintenance comes through an endowment, and signs are placed on a digital timer that only lights them from dusk to midnight to conserve resources. A survey was also conducted to identify signs throughout the city (not just downtown) that were good candidates for restoration, which they have tackled one by one. They also employ a model once very popular among preservation nonprofits of purchasing endangered signs directly to protect them until a full restoration can be funded. Not every sign in the program is from Pocatello, and thus RLN is as a cross between a sign park and a pure preservation effort. It ultimately is

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355 Shelbie Harris, “Relight the Night Has Big Plans for Neon Signs in Old Town Pocatello,” *Pocatello Idaho State Journal*, December 31, 2017, [www.idahostatejournal.com/news/local/relight-the-night-has-big-plans-for-neon-signs-in/article\\_e1f03b65-d962-5878-b37e-164fca790d13.html](http://www.idahostatejournal.com/news/local/relight-the-night-has-big-plans-for-neon-signs-in/article_e1f03b65-d962-5878-b37e-164fca790d13.html) (accessed March 4, 2020).

356 “Relight the Night – Save Our Signs,” Old Town Pocatello website, [www.oldtownpocatello.com/learn/relight-the-night](http://www.oldtownpocatello.com/learn/relight-the-night) (accessed March 4, 2020).

357 Ibid.

about revitalization, placemaking, and pride. The effectiveness of the model speaks for itself: 17 signs restored in seven years. Old Town Pocatello decided to make neon sign restoration a lynchpin of its revitalization work, garnered the resources to make it happen, and has helped spur an appreciation for neon citywide.

#### KEY FEATURES

- Local nonprofit holds events and regularly promotes the value of sign preservation as a way to build community and revitalize neighborhoods, generating enough interest and funding to restore signs themselves.

#### TAKEAWAYS

- With a strong enough initiative, it is possible to generate funds for direct sign restoration without relying exclusively on grants. If the general public thinks neon restoration is important, they will work to help make it happen.
- One successful restoration can lead to another and have cascading effects. One organization can make a big difference.

#### APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- A concerted effort led by a local nonprofit involving widespread media attention, events, and other tools of advocacy and outreach along with friendly city leadership could generate public support to save signs in place without dipping into city funds.

## ***II. Awareness Building***

IODC, while incredibly effective, is a major undertaking and can be difficult without significant resources. Awareness campaigns, however, can be done by any organization or even an individual with a passion and a little bit of time. Historic resource surveys, with their generally high level of public involvement and explicit charge to discover and highlight significant features of a community, can be one form of awareness building. On a more grassroots level, every neon sign Instagrammer, photographer, or Route 66 tchotchke salesman is on the front lines of awareness building, sending the message little by little that neon signs are interesting, important, and worth caring about. When neon advocates unite, their ability to influence change is even greater. Awareness campaigns are often grassroots efforts that get people excited about neon signs, create a community of advocacy, and foster important conversations among policymakers about what is worth preserving and how to do it. This section looks at two different



approaches taken by grassroots advocates to build awareness of the significance of neon signs in their communities.<sup>358</sup>

*a. Denver, CO*

The neon sign preservation efforts in Denver, Colorado, are led by one passionate individual, a photojournalist named Corky Scholl. In 2012, Scholl was horrified when the new owners of a local bar, the Mozart Lounge, stripped the neon off their sign and replaced it with a generic painted logo. He started the Save the Signs (STS) Facebook page in response, which quickly gained followers and showed the disconnected neon lovers in the metro area that they were not alone. In six years, the group had reached 12,000 followers from all over the world, becoming a national repository for neon sign news. When the Mozart Lounge was purchased by a new owner, those new owners knew about Scholl's page and came to him for advice on how to restore the sign to its original neon glory.<sup>359</sup> Because he had now built up a network of like-minded individuals, he was able to turn to Seth Totten of Acme Neon to create a complete reconstruction of the original neon sign (Figure 53). Totten has been working with neon since 1990 and is just as passionate about signs as Scholl: "I'm quite obsessed with saving it. I've bought out almost every old-timer within 100 miles. I have done a lot of restorations for not a lot of money because I know that if I don't do that, they're not going to save it...I'll go to any length to save one of them, especially if it's headed to the dumpster."<sup>360</sup>

This attitude is the defining feature of Save the Signs, a group of passionate people who are nimble, versatile, and dedicated enough to do whatever it takes to save neon signs. This network of individuals, connected not by a formal organizational structure or nonprofit bylaws but by a shared passion, has garnered press coverage nationwide. They offer advice to those with questions about neon and do the legwork to help save signs directly when necessary. Other neon sign shops in Denver have

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358 A third example comes from Nevada, where teacher Will Durham began the Nevada Neon Project Facebook and Instagram groups, which have gained over 7,000 followers. Durham began saving signs that were headed for the dump from around the state, primarily in Reno, which has lost numerous signs in recent years. He never sells or trades the signs and hopes to open a museum in the city, where he also leads neon walking tours. Signs have already been displayed at the Western Folklife Center, the City's 150th anniversary party, the Instagrammys, Nevada Museum of Art, and MONA. Working with his students, he also had neon designated as the official state element of Nevada (Holly Hutchings, "'This Is What I'm Meant to Do': Neon Collector Will Durham," KUNR Public Radio, May 1, 2019, [www.kunr.org/post/what-im-meant-to-do-neon-collector-will-durham](http://www.kunr.org/post/what-im-meant-to-do-neon-collector-will-durham) [accessed March 4, 2020]).

359 Barna and Homan, *Saving Neon*.

360 Ashley Dean, "Denver's Neon Signs Are in Danger of Vanishing, but There's Still Hope for Preservation," Denverite website, November 23, 2016, <https://denverite.com/2016/11/23/denvers-neon-signs-danger-vanishing-theres-still-hope-preservation> (accessed March 4, 2020).

become allies as well, and STS now has the capacity to save a sign by transporting and storing it when necessary. This has happened often enough that they are considering possibilities for opening a museum of all the signs they have saved. They agree that the signs are better if they don't have to come down at all, though. "That's the goal 100 percent, is to not ever have to have a sign museum," Scholl said. "The reality is they do get taken down. We do try to work with people or business owners just to let them know the value of their signs and just to raise awareness of the public in general — these are really cool and you're better off saving them than destroying them."<sup>361</sup> In many instances, they have been successful. STS has organized fundraisers to save at least two signs. They also convinced the new owners of the Pig 'n' Whistle restaurant sign to keep their old neon sign despite the fact that the restaurant had burned down and the new business, a dispensary, has no direct ties to the name.

In 2014, Colorado Preservation, the statewide nonprofit, got wind of what Scholl was doing and listed the Neon Signs of Colfax (a suburban strip with multiple old motels and large neon signs) on its endangered places list. Their rationale is poignant:

*These signs are increasingly endangered for a variety of reasons. The first being the trend of re-urbanization which lends itself to redevelopment; for example, many of these old motel signs are attached to structures that are run-down and dilapidated. Without a concentrated effort to highlight the beauty and craftsmanship of these signs, many will eventually fall victim to the wrecking ball. These threats can be mitigated by building an awareness and appreciation for both the history these signs represent and the craftsmanship that went into their creation.*<sup>362</sup>

The organization sponsored a survey to identify what was left along the avenue and help plan for future efforts. They also helped the strip gain national attention by successfully nominating it to the Society for Commercial Archeology's "Falling by the Wayside" list of endangered places, which brought even more press coverage. While neon remains endangered in Denver, the efforts of STS have gone a long way toward creating a culture where they now stand a better chance of survival.

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> "Neon Signs of Colfax," Colorado Preservation, Inc., website, <https://coloradopreservation.org/programs/endangered-places/neon-signs-of-colfax> (accessed March 4, 2020).

## KEY FEATURES

- Essentially a very popular Facebook page that brings advocates together and lets the city and business owners know that people care about neon and that there are people they could turn to for help with their questions.

## TAKEAWAYS

- One passionate individual can have a big impact, but when multiple passionate people get together the impact is even greater.

## APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- A group like STS has begun to take shape in Portland – PDX Neon – and the more connected they can be with the city and preservation nonprofits, the better. Restore Oregon also runs a “most endangered” list that could consider listing neon signs.

### *b. San Jose, CA*

In the heart of Silicon Valley, development pressure is extreme. The tech hub’s *de facto* capital, San Jose, California, was not always this way, however, and still harbors remnants of a neon-lit past. In a city constantly focused on the “new,” where a seemingly endless stream of newcomers don’t have any particular connection to the city’s past, neon sign preservation has some extra hurdles. Nevertheless, the San Jose Signs Project has made significant dents. Cultural historian Heather David fell in love with old signs when she moved to San Jose to attend college and has been documenting and researching them ever since. She eventually joined the board of the local nonprofit San Jose Preservation Action Council (PAC) but felt stymied by the pace of advocacy. David was inspired by a successful printed guidebook of neon signs that had led to significant change in Tucson, AZ (profiled in the next section), and decided to bring the idea to San Jose. She was able to secure \$3,000 from PAC to write, produce, and print the book. The finished product was released in 2017 and profiled 25 signs with a map, architectural descriptions, and histories of each one. While David did much of the work on the book herself, she also pulled in resources from the community, historical organizations, and business owners. The result was a product that helped to educate, advocate, and ultimately preserve signs in the city.<sup>363</sup>

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363 Heather David, *The San Jose Signs Project: A Guide to the Vintage Signage of San Jose*. San Jose, CA: Preservation Action Council of San Jose, 2017.

The release of the book provided an opportunity to bring neon fans and advocates together from around the region. It was held in a historic theater that was donated to support the cause and included a showing of the 2014 documentary *Neon* (also donated by the director). The event sold out and drew a strong young adult contingent, a demographic highly sought after by preservation organizations. The original print run of 300 sold out and netted a reasonable profit for the group. Two more print runs sold an additional 800 copies. All this success showed PAC that the community valued neon signs and that they were important to protect. It also led to a Facebook page with over 1,500 followers where efforts continue. This kind of awareness not only creates a public deterrent to businesses considering removing their historic signs because of the bad publicity it can produce, it can also inspire others to put their personal resources behind sign preservation. An attendee at the launch event was inspired to put together a crowdfunding campaign that raised \$35,000 to save an important neon sign of a dancing pig. While this sign was saved, however, five of the profiled signs have already been removed from their places in the community, and despite continued efforts and pressure, the City still will not recognize signs as potential historic resources.<sup>364</sup> This is the ultimate goal of the project, David says, because only with historic designation is there legal protection to stop an owner from removing a sign that is important to the community.<sup>365</sup> While large scale neon sign protection has not yet come to Silicon Valley, the efforts of the San Jose Neon Sign Project have shown that even without regulations and incentives, advocacy and outreach can still make a positive change.

#### KEY FEATURES

- Well-produced guidebook to historic signs coupled with big launch event and Facebook page.

#### TAKEAWAYS

- Even if major change doesn't come, small victories and awareness are important and can lead to large scale change down the road.

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<sup>364</sup> In an email exchange, Debra Jane Seltzer offered a stark reminder of the importance of coupling tour books with additional regulation and outreach whenever possible, especially if the goal is to keep signs on site: "Guidebooks are nifty but the reality is: what happens when a business closes or a building changes hands? It doesn't matter what histories have been gathered and presented to the public. There are collectors licking their chops and constantly calling the businesses to find out 'how much' for the sign." San Jose's efforts have been meaningful but limited by the lack of city support so far.

<sup>365</sup> Heather David, telephone conversation with the author, January 8, 2020.

## APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- Portland has more than enough neon signs to justify a booklet like San Jose's. The creation of such a piece here could coalesce neon fans and supporters to join the cause and work for change.
- Portland has seen some success with crowdfunding sign conservation. San Jose's example shows that even more is possible.

### **D. Combination Approaches**

Each of the above programs has seen success in one form or another. From creating a local advocacy community, to helping fund restorations, to creating systems that allow or encourage protection, each of them has made saving neon signs easier in their respective communities. What they lack, however, is a comprehensive, unified approach that ties all three strands together. A cooperative approach represents the gold standard in neon sign preservation, fostering communities where neon is valued, funded, and protected. By combining regulations, incentives, and advocacy and outreach, a select few cities have transformed their neon landscape and created a system where people want to preserve neon signs and have the ability and incentive to do so. None of them are perfect and all are works in progress, but the neon sign preservation efforts of San Francisco, Tucson, Tulsa, and Knoxville show what is possible when a unified approach to neon sign preservation is embraced.

#### ***I. San Francisco, CA***

San Francisco (SF), California, a city still brimming with vintage neon signs, is a nationwide leader in sign preservation. Over the last decade, the city has passed a vintage sign ordinance, developed a successful grant program, and now includes the nation's only dedicated neon sign preservation nonprofit, all of which have worked together to make SF a beacon of light in the sign preservation world. The City itself is to be commended for realizing that they had something valuable in their old signs. In 1998, a version of a vintage sign ordinance was created, but it took a battle over an endangered Coca Cola mural in 2011 to help the ordinance reach its potential. The rules were amended to their current form at this time and the mural was saved. Three additional signs have been authorized in the years since (a process separate from historic resource designation): the large rooftop Ghirardelli sign in Ghirardelli Square, the neon Doc's Clock bar sign, and the Britex Fabrics blade sign. While not designated landmarks themselves, some are associated with local landmarks or Legacy Businesses (an innovative approach to the preservation of important longstanding independent businesses). In these cases, the

ordinance provided a recourse when signs were endangered by removal, relocation of the business, or deferred maintenance.<sup>366</sup>

The language of the ordinance is similar to others already described. Vintage signs are described as “signs which depict in text or graphic form a particular residential, business, cultural, economic, recreational, or other valued resource which is deemed by the Planning Commission to be a cultural artifact that contributes to the visual identity and historic character of a City neighborhood or the City as a whole.” The rules allow them to be “restored, reconstructed, maintained, and technologically improved” and exempts them from every other section of the base sign code.<sup>367</sup> Signs can be nominated for the program by anyone and go through the City’s Conditional Use Authorization process, including a public hearing and Planning Commission consideration. They must be at least 40 years old and at least 50% legible, making signs in particularly bad shape ineligible. The ordinance is aimed strictly at keeping old signs or reconstructing them and does not allow wording to be changed, though signs can be moved with approval. It does come with a level of protection, as signs cannot be removed from the list without approval by the Planning Commission. While some of these benefits already exist across the board in Portland (the ability to restore and maintain signs), the San Francisco policy still offers a good precedent for how a special section of code might be crafted to confer additional benefits and protections to certain signs.

San Francisco’s sign code has other special classifications for certain sign types as well. It does not designate historic signs, but it does explicitly note that signs can be character-defining features of properties listed on or eligible for the local, state, or national registers, an important reminder to those evaluating cultural resources. In addition, it separates out historic movie theater projecting signs and historic movie theater marquee signs into their own classes. This classification allows for theater marquees or blade signs that are part of a theater on or eligible for a historic resource register to be preserved, rehabilitated, and restored. They can also be reconstructed in certain circumstances. This important special category recognizes the value of these very particular signs, which almost always include neon and rarely conform to current codes. It could be a valuable tool for preserving Portland’s large collection of historic theater signs as well. These various ways of classifying old signs are helpful but only go so far on their own. While the vintage sign ordinance has been used more often since it was

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<sup>366</sup> Stephanie Cisneros, email exchange, March 6, 2020.

<sup>367</sup> City of San Francisco, “Planning Code,” last updated February 17, 2020, [https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/san\\_francisco/latest/sf\\_planning/0-0-0-17747](https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/san_francisco/latest/sf_planning/0-0-0-17747) (accessed March 3, 2020).

amended, it has still only authorized four signs. What it has done, however, is create a regulatory environment where signs are allowed to be saved. It has been because of this environment that incentives and advocacy and outreach programs have been able to keep the city glowing.

Much of this work has been led by the team of Al Barna (a photographer) and Randall Ann Homan (a graphic designer) through their SF Neon nonprofit, the only nonprofit organization in the country dedicated strictly to neon sign preservation. In 2007, Homan was looking through Barna's collection of pictures and realized there were quite a few neon signs in the catalog. After putting them together in a Blurb book (an online, make-your-own photo book), they realized they had the potential for a real book on their hands and went back to re-photograph them for publication, happily learning that many still existed. Together they self-published *San Francisco Neon: Survivors and Lost Icons* in 2014 with the help of a Kickstarter campaign that funded the project in 14 days.

After the book's publication, individuals and organizations reached out to the couple in droves for questions and advice related to the city's neon signs. The couple had hit on something people were hungry for. One of these organizations that reached out was the SF Public Library, who asked them to create an exhibit at the main branch library combining their new photos with historic ones from the library archives. The couple put the exhibit together, while the library provided space, paid for the exhibit, and funded an exhibit catalog, *Neon Icons*, that was published in 2015.<sup>368</sup>

Through the publication of the books, they made connections to others advocating for and implementing policy around neon signs in the city and realized that an organization devoted to neon signs was a needed entity to connect those working on the issue citywide. Recognizing the difficulty of building a nonprofit from the ground up and wanting to take advantage of the extra capacity partnerships allowed, they looked for 501(c)(3) fiscal sponsors and found one in 2016 in the Tenderloin Museum, a new organization focused on the city neighborhood with the highest concentration of neon signs. The two organizations have a true partnership, with the museum providing crucial physical space and marketing help and SF Neon providing programming, content, and technical assistance on an issue important to the neighborhood. Since its official founding in 2016, SF Neon has taken on a number of additional projects including walking tours, exhibitions, talks, and a national conference, while also serving as sign designers and restoration consultants.

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368 Randall Ann Homan, conversation with the author, March 4, 2020.

Tours form a major component of the group's work and are available in six neighborhoods plus private tours. Offered roughly every other week, the tours almost always sell out and take no capital to put together, just time and brainpower. By offering multiple tours, they have found that many individuals have a desire to "collect them all" and keep coming back, bringing different friends each time to help extend the impact. So many people were so proud of completing all the tours that SF Neon created a passport as a prize for finishing the cycle. 90% of tour-goers are locals, Homan reports, many who have become long-term supporters of the organization. These individuals are not necessarily the history buffs that would go on other walking tours, but they are very interested in the history of their city's neighborhoods and their individual quirks. Portland's own strong neighborhood system would lend itself well to such a program.

The group has also sponsored numerous talks, most held at the Tenderloin Museum, but also including neon shop tours, book events, photo exhibits, video production, and participation in Design Week. This work culminates in an annual three-day festival and symposium drawing in almost 200 preservationists, artists, and advocates from around the world. Now in its third year, the Neon Speaks festival and symposium is comprised of presentations, discussions, tours, networking, games, and demonstrations throughout the Bay Area.<sup>369</sup> Their most recent initiative, however, is a partnership with the city to catalog and provide grants for neon sign restoration. This partnership is built around the SF Shines grant program.

In 2009, the SF Office of Economic and Workforce Development (OEWD) launched the SF Shines grant program as part of their Invest in Neighborhoods initiative. Not unlike Portland's PIP grant program, SF Shines provides funding for storefront or interior business improvements in targeted areas, primarily those that have been traditionally underserved. Funded initially through HUD Community Development Block Grants and now using City General Funds, the program has helped restore nine neon signs and is currently working on four more.<sup>370</sup> Aimed at improving business success, safety, and walkability in neighborhoods, OEWD notes the impact the program can have: "The look of a storefront

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369 Al Barna and Randall Ann Homan, San Francisco Neon website (accessed March 3, 2020).

370 Darcy Bender, email exchange, March 5, 2020.



can determine if you get business, or if you don't...Successful [businesses] reduce storefront vacancies, add to the variety of neighborhood-serving small businesses, [and] create good jobs for residents.”<sup>371</sup>

Funds can be used for many different kinds of work, including soft costs like design services and project management, but the program website lists signage at the top of the list. It is available in seven targeted neighborhoods and is open to businesses with at least three years left on their lease with property owner consent. Businesses also must agree to a business assessment and are encouraged to work with property owners to contribute to the financing as well, though a 1:1 match is not required.<sup>372</sup> Grants range from \$4,000-\$15,000 and led to \$2.7 million in improvements between 2009 and 2017. About \$52,000 had gone toward seven neon sign restorations by 2018 and generated \$41,000 in additional investment. Average total cost of restorations was in the \$10,000 to \$25,000 range.<sup>373</sup> One particularly large recent project was the Ave Theater, which used SF Shines funds to assist with a \$300,000 façade restoration aimed at revitalizing the neighborhood after the church that had been renting the space moved out. The investment has already begun to pay dividends, as the theater’s two storefronts have been leased to a successful pizza and ice cream shop, and plans are in the works to use the theater auditorium for a community recreation center. It has certainly sparked pride in the surrounding neighborhood.<sup>374</sup>

SF Neon got involved through one of their tour-goers, showing the incredible interconnection of events and the power of successful outreach and willingness to partner. The tour-goer noticed the conversion of a local neon sign to LED with a notice that it was funded through SF Shines. He reached out to SF Neon to see if there was any intervention possible, and the group connected with new SF Shines program manager Darcy Bender. Rather than turning them away, Bender welcomed the expertise of SF Neon and was excited to have the involvement of a community group that both cared passionately about the work they were doing and were experts in their field. Bender asked SF Neon where to find best practices for physical neon sign restoration that the City could follow. Realizing no such guidelines existed, the group received grants from the local preservation nonprofit, SF Heritage, as well as the NPS to create it themselves, bringing in the expertise of neon sign advocates and makers nationwide and

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371 Caleb Pershan, “Neon Renaissance: Li Po Lounge Is Latest to Restore Classic Sign with City Help,” Eater San Francisco website, August 29, 2017, <https://sf.eater.com/2017/8/29/16217428/neon-sf-shines-li-po-lounge-chinatown-signs> (accessed March 3, 2020).

372 “SF Shines,” San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development website, <https://oewd.org/sf-shines> (accessed March 3, 2020).

373 Carrie Sisto, “‘Tenderloin Neon A-Z’ Aims to Restore Neon across the Neighborhood,” Hoodline website, August 8, 2018, <https://hoodline.com/2018/08/tenderloin-neon-a-z-aims-to-restore-neon-across-the-neighborhood> (accessed March 3, 2020).

374 Randall Ann Homan, conversation with the author, March 4, 2020.

coalescing a strong neon community. *Saving Neon* was published in 2018 and now serves as an important set of standards others can use to properly conserve neon signs.

A further partnership arose from the discussions, bringing SF Neon, the Tenderloin Museum, Oakland's Neon Works sign shop, and OEWD together for the Neon A-Z initiative. The \$10,000 initiative is meant to increase the capacity and effectiveness of SF Shines grants to restore more neon signs in the Tenderloin neighborhood. SF Neon conducted a survey of 100 neon signs in the neighborhood in 2018, including opportunities for public comment through the organization's website. Signs were rated based on aesthetics, history, condition, community benefit, and current electric service to identify priorities for restoration. OEWD works with property owners and then reaches out to SF Neon to help set up the basic electrical systems needed to re-light long-dark signs. All this initial work paves the way for SF Shines to come in with grant funding to light the signs once again. Three signs have been re-lit this way, with the goal to do four to five more per year.<sup>375</sup>

San Francisco's success has been built on partnership. Neither the vintage sign ordinance, nor SF Shines, nor even the powerhouse SF Neon nonprofit has seen success in a vacuum. Individually, they have important but isolated impacts. By combining efforts and building on one another, however, these various neon sign preservation efforts in the city have made an enormous difference in ensuring San Francisco's vast collection of neon has a chance to survive.

#### KEY FEATURES

- Vintage sign ordinance provides a system for providing special rules for certain signs. In this case, signs are not proactively pursued as a result of a survey, but the rules do provide a tool for communities or owners to use if a sign is in danger.
- Vintage signs only have to be 40 years old, not the more common 50.
- Special rules for historic movie theater signs and marquees.
- Explicit language allowing signs to be noted as character-defining features of a landmarked building.

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<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

- Storefront improvement grant program listing signage at the top of the list and focused on underserved areas.
- Dedicated neon nonprofit offers tours, exhibitions, and talks while serving as the “go-to” for questions on neon signs citywide.

#### TAKEAWAYS

- Progress takes time. San Francisco’s Vintage Sign Ordinance existed for over a decade before it had an impact, but amendments have helped it begin to reach its potential.
- Financial incentives for neon signs and reaching underserved neighborhoods can go hand in hand.
- The combination of regulations, incentives, and a dedicated advocacy and outreach team in the form of a nonprofit has a larger impact than any of them could have alone.

#### APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- Portland has a large number of extant operating historic theaters and should consider special sign classes like San Francisco’s to make preserving their special signs easier.
- Portland already has an excellent storefront restoration grant. Explicitly promoting or focusing on signs could help it have an even bigger impact on community landmarks in traditionally underserved areas.
- A photo exhibit at the main library, City Archives, Oregon Historical Society, Portland Art Museum, Architectural Heritage Center, or other cultural institution in Portland combining historic and contemporary neon sign photos could raise awareness of the history, artistry, and current state of neon in the city.
- Portland has more than enough neon signs for a photo book like those that have been produced for so many other cities and should be considered by a local author, photographer, or nonprofit.
- Further Portland neon tours could be developed to supplement the work of Kate Widdows’ downtown tour.

## ***II. Tucson, AZ***

Tucson, Arizona, is another national leader in neon sign preservation, pooling the resources of the local preservation nonprofit, artists, the sign industry, a museum, federal aid, and city government to create a culture where old neon signs are valued and supported. Along with crafting one of the nation's earliest vintage sign ordinances, Tucson has also produced a neon sign tour book, sign survey, sign park, and one of the nation's newest sign museums. I was fortunate to visit Tucson as part of the research for this paper, where I was able to photograph many of the city's signs and meet with city planner Daniel Barsuck, Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation (THPF) CEO Demion Clinco, and Ignite Neon Sign Museum and Cook and Company Signmakers owner Jude Cook.

Tucson's effectiveness in sign preservation is based largely on its ability to bring together a diverse constituency and leverage various tools to create a widespread culture of neon sign appreciation. Much of this effort was led by the city's preservation nonprofit, THPF. This small organization, staffed only by a single contracted employee, launched an effective initiative that helped transform the neon landscape of the city. THPF's Neon Sign Project initiative took a unified three-pronged approach: a tour booklet, a sign park, and code amendments. The organization decided to focus on neon signs around 2010 as part of their wider efforts to use preservation to serve underserved communities and celebrate the fabric of everyday life, rather than the grand architectural accomplishments often fawned over in preservation circles. Neon signs were also low-hanging fruit for an organization that had limited resources, as they were less costly to preserve but could still provide a strong impact, giving them an excellent return on investment. Restoring a neon sign was also a relatively easy way to invest in revitalization and show that things were changing in depressed areas of town. Importantly, each of the three prongs of the initiative were undertaken concurrently and seen as supporting one another.<sup>376</sup>

The base of the initiative was *The Neon Pueblo*, a tour booklet that highlighted 30 neon signs in various states of repair around the city. Funded by a 2010 Arizona Humanities Council Grant, the book was seen as a way to create a groundswell of interest in neon signs that could sustain the wider movement needed to accomplish the other prongs. The inspiration for the book came from an earlier project in Tulsa (described below). A survey was also conducted that listed 150 signs throughout the city. While never fully integrated into wider planning decisions at the city or made available to the public, the survey did help determine which signs would be featured in the booklet, and this process helped a team craft criteria

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<sup>376</sup> Demion Clinco, conversation with the author, March 13, 2020.

for designating historic signs during code revisions that were also part of the larger initiative. Efforts were enhanced by the support of local artists and activists, including an artist who made refrigerator magnets of local neon signs and a Yahoo group of local sign advocates, the moderator of which earned a spot on the local historic commission and was able to be an ally within the City. Five thousand books were given away as part of the initiative and 5,000 more sold. My own survey of the signs in the booklet revealed that the signs are in various states of repair (as they were when the booklet was published) but many have been restored. Only two of the signs are no longer in place. One was replaced by a plastic replica and now lives in the local sign museum, and the other appears to have disappeared entirely. This is an excellent retention rate after eight years.<sup>377</sup> (Figure 54)

The second prong of THPF's initiative was the "Vintage Tucson Neon Art Walk" – a sign park. In 2012, four local neon signs were installed on the grounds of Pima Community College to create the park. This was possible because the City's recent Oracle Area Revitalization Plan had created the Gateway Business Alliance. This plan had identified neon signs as a character-defining feature of the disadvantaged neighborhood centered on an old U.S. highway with multiple remaining old signs. The business alliance embraced the ideas of sign restoration and a sign park to help spur redevelopment in the area.<sup>378</sup> Raising the funds for the park and restorations took effort but was helped by the concurrent work on the tour booklet. THPF CEO Demion Clinco shared the story of a rescue mission with a neon sign that was initially resistant to use needed funds for sign restoration but became a supporter as they came to understand the work as a way to revitalize the neighborhood. The themes of art and revitalization were key to the entire conversation, though legally the signs were still classified as signs, not art. The signs were all local and came from various sources including a collector's donation, a purchase, and rescues. The \$25,000 needed for the restorations came from donations, including a large event held at an iconic downtown hotel (itself with a rooftop neon sign). Many influential city leaders attended the event and wrote checks in support of the initiative themselves. This financial backing by city leaders was critical to the park's success. The initiative received widespread media attention, one media hit leading to another, and the lighting ceremony drew a crowd of 3,000, showing that the community was really interested in connecting with this part of their history. The signs shine bright today and are owned and maintained by

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid.; Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation, *The Neon Pueblo: A Guide to Tucson's Midcentury Vintage Advertising* (Tucson, AZ: Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation, 2012).

<sup>378</sup> Demion Clinco, "Vintage Tucson Neon Art Walk Proposal," Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation, 2011, [https://preservetucson.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/THPF\\_-\\_Vintage\\_Tucson\\_Neon\\_Art\\_Walk\\_2011.4.pdf](https://preservetucson.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/THPF_-_Vintage_Tucson_Neon_Art_Walk_2011.4.pdf) (accessed March 5, 2020).

the college, which also paid for their installation. The college's commitment to neon signs recently extended to two neighboring motels as well, including the city's most iconic sign (and the inspiration behind the logo of a major Hollywood film company): the Tucson Inn. The college recently purchased the properties and committed to preserving the signs, though the fate of the equally important buildings themselves remains up in the air. The organization hopes this model for public art and economic revitalization can be followed in other communities as well.<sup>379</sup>

The lynchpin necessary to make the sign park and any other sign restorations in the city possible was the third prong of the initiative: sign code amendments. A *LIFE Magazine* article in the 1970s had called Tucson's Speedway Boulevard the ugliest street in America because of its profusion of signage. The City responded by cracking down on old signage citywide and crafting one of the strictest sign codes in the nation, making it virtually impossible to create new neon signs or perform any work on existing ones.<sup>380</sup> This code had remained largely intact through the decades and meant that neon signs continued to disappear. Eight were lost just in the few years needed to craft the code amendments.<sup>381</sup> The first true challenge to the code came in the form of the Pueblo Hotel's "diving lady" sign in the late 2000s. Neon signs featuring women in swimsuits were once common across the country, quickly letting motorists know that the motel they advertised had a pool. The Pueblo Hotel was in a prime downtown location adjacent to a central park and had recently been purchased by a law firm that had invested over \$500,000 in the building's restoration. The new owners wanted to restore the sign, but it was illegal to do for a number of reasons: "she was located in a right-of-way; exceeded the maximum height of 12 feet; failed to meet the required setback; was a pole sign in a pedestrian area where such signs were forbidden; and couldn't become a ground sign because they weren't allowed either. If the sign was taken down for repairs, it could not be put back up."<sup>382</sup> When the City denied the owners a permit to adapt the sign, it kicked off a conversation about whether these "iconic images of the city's past" were worth preserving.<sup>383</sup>

THPF was a major catalyst in that process, which often called upon the beloved diving girl as a symbol for what was wrong with the current city code. Conversations began in 2009, and THPF was joined by the Tucson-Pima County Historical Commission, the City of Tucson Historic Preservation

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379 Clinco, conversation with the author.

380 Daniel Barsuck, conversation with the author, March 13, 2020.

381 Jude Cook, conversation with the author, March 13, 2020.

382 Bridget Mintz Testa, "Sign of the Times," *Planning* magazine, February 2016, [www.planning.org/planning/2016/feb/signofthetimes.htm](http://www.planning.org/planning/2016/feb/signofthetimes.htm) (accessed March 5, 2020).

383 Ibid.

Office, the Citizen Sign Code Committee, the city Sign Code Division, as well as business and property owners. After two years and 24 meetings, the Historic Landmark Sign (HLS) Ordinance passed City Council unanimously. The ordinance was an attempt to allow signs like the diving girl to survive and be adapted to meet current business needs, allowing “dead signs” for businesses no longer in operation to be reused. If historic buildings could be updated with minor alterations that retained historic character, so too could signs, they argued.<sup>384</sup> This rehabilitation aspect was an important component of the ordinance, as was its universal coverage of the city, altering the base code rather than applying just to an overlay zone. It was not just meant to encourage rehabilitation, however, but preservation as well.

The code revisions encourage voluntary preservation of historically significant older signs, which are often larger than what is allowed by code, allowing signs that meet specific criteria to be designated as HLSs. This allows them to be repaired, restored, adaptively reused, relocated, and exempted from a business’ sign allowance.<sup>385</sup> Eligible signs fit into one of three categories: Classic (installed prior to 1961), Transitional (installed between 1961 and 1974), or Replica (a reconstruction of a pre-1961 sign), with policies laid out for each.<sup>386</sup> Eligible signs must meet physical criteria of having had exposed lighting at one point; feature materials representative of the original period of construction; be non-rectangular and non-planar; and be safe or able to be made safe without altering the historic appearance. All mounting styles are eligible (detached, projecting, roof, fascia), but fascia signs were just added during a 2015 amendment.<sup>387</sup> They must also meet cultural criteria of exemplifying heritage; having extraordinary aesthetic qualities; representing a unique business, local chain, rare example, or be noted in scholarly documentation; and maintaining integrity.

Owners who apply to have their signs designated must complete a treatment plan that is approved by the historic commission, submit to an inspection after five years, and sign a consent waiver acknowledging a 30-day demolition delay. This process is akin to a mini-National Register nomination and requires consultation with neighborhood associations, the public, and the city; proof of the sign’s existing condition; and plans showing compliance with the above criteria. A blank copy of the Treatment Plan document is included here as Appendix H. Submissions must also make note of character-defining

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384 Ibid.

385 Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation, *The Neon Pueblo*.

386 Specifics of the code language are informed by Cagasan, “A Methodology for Preserving Las Vegas Neon Electric Displays”; Schwartz, “Conserving Historic Commercial Signs in Hollywood, California”; and especially City of Tucson, “Historic Landmark Signs (HLS) Preservation Program,” City of Tucson Planning and Development Services website, [www.tucsonaz.gov/pdsd/historic-landmark-signs-hls-preservation-program](http://www.tucsonaz.gov/pdsd/historic-landmark-signs-hls-preservation-program) (accessed March 5, 2020).

387 Barsuck, conversation with the author.

features, including materials, technologies, structure, colors, shapes, symbols, text, font/typography, and art. Different treatments have different guidelines that must be followed as well. Restorations must be to the original period based on the sign's classification (i.e. Classic signs must be restored to a pre-1961 look, Transitional signs to a 1961-1974 look) and cannot increase in size. Rehabilitations must match the existing text's materials, letter size, style, and color. Relocations must go to the original property or an area with at least three other old signs within a half mile, meet modern setback requirements, and not overwhelm other historic signs in the area. Replica signs are allowed only on their original site in areas with an existing concentration of old signs and must use visually matching technology. Further, while many owners use designation so they can make alterations or move a sign, this kind of redevelopment is not required, and signs can be designated "as is." These restrictions provide guidance to decisionmakers about what signs can be designated and is meant to ensure that signs respect both history and context. The sign survey is not explicitly used by the City to seek candidates for designation and sign owners must voluntarily initiate the process, but some outreach was done by THPF (who has also helped write some applications), and City officials are well-versed in the program enough to highlight it when owners of potentially eligible signs contact them.

The only protection that comes with designation is a 30-day demolition delay, during which time the city can publicize the sign and try to find a buyer. Bonuses for owners who complete the process include the ability to have animation, movement, rooftop location, certain changes to represent the current business, relocation, and the first designated sign on a property does not count toward the property's sign area allowance. Importantly, the allowance for changes to advertise the current business and not counting designated signs against a property's total sign allowance are cited by owners of designated signs as the most effective incentives that encouraged them to complete the process.<sup>388</sup> Tucson's HLS Ordinance is significant for being among the first and most comprehensive such ordinances crafted, allowing for signs to be designated through a special process as standalone historic landmarks rather than just noted as contributing features to a building. All three individuals I spoke with in Tucson felt the program had been successful. Ten signs were designated in the first year alone, and 19 total have taken advantage of the program.<sup>389</sup> It was not perfect right out of the gate, however, and tweaks continue to be made.

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388 Testa, "Sign of the Times."

389 Daniel Barsuck, email exchange, March 31, 2020.



Among the potential downsides of the program is the requirement for at least three other eligible signs to already exist within a half mile of a relocated or reconstructed sign. An example of this was the Tucson Seat Cover company, which was not able to take its iconic vintage sign with it when it moved to a new location because the new location did not meet the “cluster” requirement needed for it to earn the relocation allowance provided by designation. The sign was lost as a result.<sup>390</sup> Additionally, the three-tiered classification system limits to what era signs can be restored. If, for example, a sign was built in the 1950s, it would be a Classic sign. If the sign’s most significant look, however, was from a period in the late 1960s, current regulations would not allow it to be restored to that look. In a related issue, replica signs are limited to those signs built prior to 1961, meaning an iconic sign built in 1962 cannot be replicated. The current year-based classification system also does not allow for the possibility of any historically significant sign having been built after 1974. As time progresses and these signs potentially become significant, they will have no path to designation. A better model would be based on distance from the present rather than set years.

City planner Daniel Barsuck recognizes some of these issues, which have begun to be addressed. Without changing the underlying designation system, the City added the new Sign Design option during 2015 code revisions. This option is available to new neon signs as well as existing signs that don’t qualify for the HLS program or just want a different process. This process, which is essentially design review, lets signs be reviewed by a special Sign Design Review Committee rather than go through the landmark process or conform to regular sign standards.<sup>391</sup> Such a program could be a disaster if it provided an easy way out for signs to be dramatically altered rather than preserved, but that appears to not be the case here. Barsuck reports that it has been very successful and is being widely utilized. It would even provide alternatives to some of the issues with the HLS program, allowing a workaround for issues like the one that faced Tucson Seat Cover as well as the complications of a year-based classification. This is possible because of reviewers who now understand the value of neon thanks to the HLS program and THPF efforts. Changes are still in the works, and Barsuck admits the HLS process may be overly

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390 Dale Quinn, “Neon Sign Will Grace Its Corner No More,” *Arizona Daily Star* (Tucson), December 15, 2011, [https://tucson.com/business/local/neon-sign-will-grace-its-corner-no-more/article\\_8e6c55ae-f594-5461-b1b4-58e1337c7044.html](https://tucson.com/business/local/neon-sign-will-grace-its-corner-no-more/article_8e6c55ae-f594-5461-b1b4-58e1337c7044.html) (accessed March 18, 2020).

391 City of Tucson, Unified Development Code, adopted October 9, 2012, available at [https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/tucson/latest/tucson\\_az/0-0-0-24996](https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/tucson/latest/tucson_az/0-0-0-24996) (accessed April 1, 2020).

complicated. Current revisions may look at alterations to the cluster rule and year-based classification system.<sup>392</sup>

An additional former component of the City's sign preservation efforts was a HUD block grant aimed at combating blight along Tucson's Miracle Mile that was available from 2012 to 2016.<sup>393</sup> The 75/25 cost-share grant allowed historic signs to be restored without meeting current code if the owner agreed to keep them in place for 10 years. The contract would also run with the title if the property was sold.<sup>394</sup> This financial incentive ultimately helped restore five signs.<sup>395</sup> Since this grant expired, there have been no additional sign-focused grants in Tucson, though there is a façade restoration program that can help with some neon signs in certain situations. Additionally, the City has begun conversations with THPF about the possibility of a new sign grant in the future.<sup>396</sup>

A single individual has done most of the neon sign restoration work in the city out of Tucson's only neon sign shop and also runs one of the country's newest sign museums. Jude Cook has been in the neon sign business for over 40 years and collected many signs during that time. Feeling that these signs would be put to much better use if they could be experienced by the public, Cook purchased an old hardware store in Tucson in 2017 and opened the Ignite Sign Art Museum there the following year. The museum's collection was filled out by additional signs he saved and donations from individuals or business owners who caught wind of what was happening. The response has been good. Cook said many individuals don't just enjoy the exhibits but often thank him for preserving the history and culture that these signs represent. This shows that people truly value old signs, that they represent much more than advertising to many individuals. (Figure 55) Cook's sign business helps make the museum possible, but the synergy doesn't end there. He was critical to the success of the sign park (as well as the sign park in nearby Casa Grande) and has provided a temporary or permanent home for signs that cannot be saved *in situ*. More research would be needed to determine if the availability of such a safe resting ground for neon signs disincentivizes preserving neon *in situ*, but it does provide a way for many signs to at least stay out of the dumpster. Cook was also involved in the crafting of the HLS ordinance. After speaking up regularly at Sign Code Committee meetings as a voice for the industry, he was asked to join the group himself. He says the code works pretty well and has certainly helped but could be even stronger, as it

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392 Barsuck, conversation with the author.

393 Barsuck, email exchange.

394 Schwartz, "Conserving Historic Commercial Signs in Hollywood, California."

395 Clinco, conversation with the author; Cook, conversation with the author.

396 Barsuck, email exchange.

offers no protections aside from a demolition delay and does not address the remaining difficulty of creating new neon signs.<sup>397</sup>

The results of these widespread efforts are that tourists now visit Tucson to see the neon signs, including a new “gateway cactus” public art piece near the entrance to downtown. This new neon cactus did receive pushback, but the results of the groundswell THPF’s efforts had created was that the city ultimately found the money to make the cactus not just art but neon art. This groundswell is the ultimate success of the city’s unified efforts – multiple individuals, organizations, and tools were combined to create the groundswell of support for neon that led to neon becoming an integral part of the city’s culture, both at the policy level and among the public. While the THPF’s Neon Sign Project initiative has largely wrapped up and the organization has shifted focus to other priorities, their efforts laid the groundwork that allowed them to successfully step back, knowing that neon was in a much better position in Tucson than when they began.

#### KEY FEATURES

- Survey of the city’s old neon signs. While not used by the City in an official capacity, the survey helped inform decisions on which signs to include in a sign tour booklet and craft criteria for designating historic signs as historic landmarks.
- Neon sign tour booklet highlighting 30 extant signs around the city used to create awareness and support.
- Neon sign park with four signs in partnership with local community college as public art and economic development.
- Historic Landmark Sign Ordinance, among the first in the country, provides way to list and provide minimal protections for old neon signs that would previously have been nonconforming. This allows them to be preserved, reused, and relocated.
- Limited financial incentive from HUD provided seed money for restorations at a key time.

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<sup>397</sup> Cook, conversation with the author.

- Neon sign museum run by city's only neon sign shop creates wider audience and appreciation for signs while providing a vital ally to temporarily store signs or save those that cannot be kept in place.

#### TAKEAWAYS

- Allowing for changes to old signs to advertise the current business and not counting old signs against a property's total sign allowance are cited as the most effective incentives for business owners to save their old signs.
- Too much complexity can be a hindrance. While Tucson's Historic Landmark Sign Ordinance has been successful, its complexity may prevent more business owners from taking advantage of it.
- Sign preservation efforts are always a work in progress. Tucson has continued to refine its thinking to improve upon their strategy for protecting signs, first with revisions in 2015 that allowed for design review options and now with more revisions on the way.
- Sign parks can be an important catalyst for the protection of signs *in situ* if they can be effectively leveraged as such. The same is true for vintage sign tour booklets.
- Talking about neon signs as both public art and economic revitalization tools can be an excellent strategy to gain support for sign preservation and help foster pride and investment in underserved communities.
- Sign museums may disincentivize *in situ* preservation (though further research would be needed), but they are beloved by local residents and tourists alike and help foster a wider appreciation for the importance of signs.
- Multi-faceted initiatives like THPF's provide an effective way to create the groundswell needed for lasting change rather than one-off solutions.

#### APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- There are a number of neon signs in storage around Portland that come from the area. Putting them in a sign park (perhaps on 82<sup>nd</sup> Ave. in partnership with Portland Community College) could be a valuable way to increase awareness of signs throughout the city and spur activity in a traditionally underserved area of town.

- Portland's lack of a vintage sign ordinance puts it behind many other cities nationwide. Tucson's efforts show the impact these ordinances can have, even if they are not perfect and need to continue to be tweaked. Portland's first attempt at sign recognition through code on Interstate Avenue should not be abandoned but should lead to larger efforts like Tucson's.
- Tucson's efforts were successful in part because they brought together a wide base of constituents. An organization, or the City itself, should take a leadership role in bringing together Portland's wide base of support and expertise in neon signs to create the groundswell needed for lasting change.

### *III. Tulsa, OK*

Back on Route 66, Tulsa, Oklahoma, has also shown itself to be a leader in efforts to promote neon signs. Within a political climate strongly supportive of private property rights, city policymakers, the federal government, and state and local preservation and economic development nonprofits have partnered to implement creative policies and programs that show an attention to neon signs rarely matched elsewhere.

Tulsa's efforts began out of necessity and show the long reach a single grant can have even decades down the line. In 2003, the large two-sided rooftop Meadow Gold sign received an NPS Route 66 Cost-Share Grant to fund its restoration. Originally constructed in the 1930s, the historic sign featured dual 20'x40' panels and had become an icon of the city. The business underneath the sign moved before grant-funded work on the sign was complete, and the property owner wanted to tear the building down. This predicament led to a long process of negotiating how to proceed. Two nonprofits, the Oklahoma Route 66 Association (OK66) and the Tulsa Foundation for Architecture (TFA, a preservation organization) were able to help broker a deal that allowed the sign to be taken down and relocated to the top of a new purpose-built pavilion resembling the original location and placed on donated land. Instrumental to this success was a city, not unlike Portland, that stepped up to save the sign by taking ownership itself.<sup>398</sup> Ultimately, it was a combination of the grant, city funding, and private donations that saved the sign, which was reinstalled in 2009 along with interpretive panels on the history of neon, the property, Meadow Gold, and the sign itself, along with a story of how the sign was saved.<sup>399</sup> City funding

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<sup>398</sup> Kaisa Barthuli, telephone conversation with the author.

<sup>399</sup> "Meadow Gold Sign," Tulsa Vision 2025 website, <https://vision2025.info/meadow-gold-sign> (accessed February 4, 2020).

was possible because of an \$8 million bond passed in 2005 to implement the City's Vision 2025 strategic plan, which included the Route 66 Master Plan. The Plan focused on capital projects and explicitly included the Meadow Gold sign, but it did not provide money for maintenance.<sup>400</sup>

All of this effort to save a neon sign raised awareness within government and the community and set the stage for more neon preservation efforts to come. TFA took the opportunity at this time to conduct a survey of 259 neon signs citywide, not just along Route 66. The survey was funded through the National Trust's Preservation Services Fund's Ruth and Allen Mayo Fund for Historic Preservation in Oklahoma and collected information on sign names, types, mount, letter style, history, location, and tubing description. Fourteen of the most significant were highlighted in a booklet complete with short histories that raised awareness of these local gems.<sup>401</sup> This appears to be the first such awareness-building neon sign guide booklet, and has inspired others since, including those in Tucson and San Jose. The full booklet is included here in Appendix I. Unfortunately, Tulsa has no local historic designation process, and thus there was no way to seek hard protections for the signs. Neither was the survey folded into city decision making, and it currently lives in a Dropbox account that is not accessible to the public. All the signs featured in the book survive, but many from the larger survey have vanished.<sup>402</sup> The survey was nonetheless a valuable exercise to catalog these important signs for perpetuity and the historical record, and it helped create a climate where future change was possible.

This change came in the form of Vision Tulsa, the 2015 update to the Tulsa 2025 plan, which created the city's Route 66 Commission and funded it with \$250,000 annually. Some of this money has gone toward maintenance of the Meadow Gold Sign and allowed for the re-creation of the clock faces that once graced the signs. The commission, which is composed of volunteer representatives from various constituencies throughout the city, has a Preservation and Design Committee that has focused its energy on neon sign promotion efforts along the route. Recognizing that the primary barrier to neon sign creation and restoration was a code that was generally unfriendly to neon, the committee used Albuquerque's Neon Design Overlay Zone as inspiration to create a similar zone that would erase some of the barriers neon faced in Tulsa. Passed in 2018 and covering signs within 300 feet of the route or within 600 feet at intersections, the overlay zone has made it much easier to work with neon on Route 66

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400 Rhys Martin, conversation with the author, February 5, 2020.

401 Tulsa Foundation for Architecture, "Vintage Tulsa Neon Signs," [www.cityoftulsa.org/media/9602/neonsignexamples-getinspired.pdf](http://www.cityoftulsa.org/media/9602/neonsignexamples-getinspired.pdf) (accessed February 5, 2020).

402 Amanda DeCort, conversation with the author.

in the city.<sup>403</sup> Interestingly, the zone does not include the downtown section of Route 66, a concession during the crafting of the ordinance to property rights advocates who, despite the lack of restrictions and inclusion of bonuses in the overlay, were fearful of what they nevertheless perceived to be restrictions.<sup>404</sup> Property owners within the zone who apply for signs with 25% or more of the surface covered in exposed neon can be approved for signs that are taller and larger than usually allowed, include movement or flashing of the neon, and project into the right of way in certain circumstances.<sup>405</sup> The downside of overlay zones, however, is that they are really focused on new neon and do very little to address the issue of legalizing restoration that is necessary to save old neon. They make neon signs legal without necessarily legalizing their restoration.<sup>406</sup>

Along with facilitating the creation of the overlay zone, the committee recently launched the Neon Sign Grant program in April 2019. With a pool of \$40,000 per year, the matching grant will reimburse neon sign projects within the overlay zone up to \$10,000 and comes with an efficient permitting process.<sup>407</sup> The program's goal, firmly rooted in economic development, is to "encourage installation of exterior signage containing not less than 25 percent neon or alternative LED lighting within the Route 66 Overlay District to stimulate the pedestrian realm and to enhance the tourist experience," though a preference is stated for neon over LED. The grant does not have specific design regulations aside from the percentage of neon but requires drawings; site plan; cost estimate; review by the committee; and a three-year warranty with a sign contractor, during which time the sign cannot be moved or removed.<sup>408</sup> A flier explaining the grant in further detail is included here in Appendix I. In roughly one year, the grant has funded eight signs, including two restorations, a rather remarkable number showing just how effective financial incentives can be in a city with a hunger for neon.<sup>409</sup> Despite not integrating their sign survey directly into planning, limiting efforts to a linear stretch, and focusing on new neon, Tulsa still represents a comprehensive and effective approach to neon sign preservation. The

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403 Martin, conversation with the author.

404 DeCort, conversation with the author.

405 "Route 66 Neon Sign Grant," City of Tulsa website, [www.cityoftulsa.org/government/capital-programs/vision-tulsa/vision-projects/route-66](http://www.cityoftulsa.org/government/capital-programs/vision-tulsa/vision-projects/route-66) (accessed February 5, 2020).

406 TFA director Amanda DeCort said that if they could go back and re-do the code overlay, they would work harder to make sure old signs were included because current zoning code still does not allow old signs to be taken down and put back up, forcing all restoration work to be done on site.

407 Martin, conversation with the author.

408 "Route 66 Neon Sign Grant." City of Tulsa website.

409 OK66 director and committee member Rhys Martin notes that part of the reason for the low number of restorations (aside from the necessity that signs be restored on-site) is that there are only about 12 neon signs left within the overlay zone.

city and its partners collaborated to save an iconic sign, produced a survey and tour booklet that has inspired others, altered city code language to be friendlier to neon, and incentivized neon signs with funding. This comprehensive approach of regulations, incentives, and advocacy and outreach has been almost 20 years in the making, but the perseverance of those involved makes the city a nationwide leader in progressive thinking about neon signs.

#### KEY FEATURES

- City worked with nonprofits to find creative solutions for saving iconic signs, which led in one case to City ownership.
- A citywide neon sign survey and tour booklet, which unfortunately has not been utilized by the City to enact the kinds of widespread changes seen in Tucson.
- Strategic planning process created unique economic development commission focused on Route 66 that led to an overlay zone to encourage neon and grant funding to incentivize it.

#### TAKEAWAYS

- Friendly code is critical. Without it, the ability to save existing signs is reduced dramatically. Despite funding through grants, the impact on historic neon signs has been less than it could be because code regulations still limit how signs can be repaired or updated.
- Surveys are valuable tools regardless of their outcome, but they are far more effective if cities incorporate their findings into future decision making. Nevertheless, a survey that is never embraced by a city can still have an impact that can lead to positive neon sign policies and inspire others, even if years down the line.
- Neon preservation efforts focused on linear corridors can have an outstanding impact on those corridors but leave those not on the protected route without resources.
- A city government's stance on neon sign preservation can have an enormous impact. Tulsa has not reached San Francisco's level of citywide sign preservation, but its momentum shows promise.
- A localized overlay zone can be a valuable tool for promoting new neon, but further code adaptations are needed to protect existing signs.



## APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- Like Portland, Tulsa stepped in to take ownership of an important neon cultural icon. While progress has been slow, a culture more amenable to neon has started to take hold in the city with multiple recent initiatives. Portland has shown that it has an interest in preserving neon signs and should consider following Tulsa's lead by taking the next step to create a more comprehensive neon sign protection program.

### *IV. Knoxville, TN*

Finally, the eastern Tennessee city of Knoxville shows that neon sign preservation best practices are not limited to cities west of the Mississippi River. Uniquely, efforts here began with the philanthropy of a single local corporation in partnership with the local preservation nonprofit. Local coffee manufacturer JFG has roots in Knoxville but is part of the much larger Reily Foods Company family. In 2010, they launched the Save Our Signs initiative to help fund neon sign conservation in a 15-county region, beginning with two prominent signs of their own. Using the restoration of their own large neon signs as publicity, JFG ran a promotion where a percentage of earnings from all coffee sold in stores and restaurants within the region over a period of four months would be put into a special fund managed by Knox Heritage that could be used by other local businesses to restore their own signs (Figure 56). Individuals could also donate directly to the nonprofit, and ultimately the fund ended up with \$15,000 to distribute.<sup>410</sup> Matching grants were available for up to \$2,500 and helped restore five signs, four of which were neon (a theater marquee, a restaurant sign on an adaptively reused apartment complex, and two restaurants), before the program ended in 2017.<sup>411</sup> An information sheet from the program is included here as Appendix J.

At the same time, the city began working on amendments to the sign code to create historic and landmark sign classifications. While the two initiatives were not directly connected, there can be no doubt that policymakers would have been aware of the recent effort to protect neon signs in their community when crafting the new ordinance.<sup>412</sup> Whereas vintage sign ordinances in Tucson and nearby

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410 "Save Our Signs – Knox Heritage and JFG Announce Preservation Partnership," Preservation Directory website, August 26, 2010, [www.preservationdirectory.com/PreservationBlogs/ArticleDetail.aspx?id=2105&catid=1](http://www.preservationdirectory.com/PreservationBlogs/ArticleDetail.aspx?id=2105&catid=1) (accessed March 3, 2020).

411 Hollie Cook, email exchange, March 3, 2020. Cook mentioned that these grants came in two batches – 2012 and 2017 – and accounted for roughly \$10,000. It is not clear why the gap existed nor why the total distributed was less than the fund contained. JFG also ran the program in Charlotte, North Carolina.

412 Ibid. Ironically, given the historically contentious relationship between city beautification efforts and neon signs, Knoxville's ordinance was borne out of the Keep Knoxville Beautiful campaign to restrict billboards in the city.

Nashville create categories of signs based on age or replica status, Knoxville separates its listed signs based on whether or not they need to be relocated. “Historic” and “landmark” signs were added to the zoning code in 2015 to allow signs over 50 years old to be considered conforming, both on their original site and following relocation. A landmark sign is “an existing, nonconforming, on-premise sign, which exhibits unique characteristics, enhances the streetscape or identity of a neighborhood and contributes to the historical or cultural character of the streetscape or the community at large.”<sup>413</sup> This definition explicitly notes the positive contributions of old signs to neighborhood character.

The code further defines a historic sign as “an existing, nonconforming, historically significant sign that contributes to the historical or cultural character of the community at large which has been removed from its original location within the City of Knoxville and is to be reused and relocated to a different location on its original site or relocated to another location within the community.”<sup>414</sup> This is an important decision that shows an interest by the City in not just protecting signs that are still standing, but in allowing signs to be relocated to ensure their preservation. These efforts to fund restoration and allow for the retention and relocation of old signs in Knoxville do not rise to the comprehensive level seen in San Francisco, Tucson, or Tulsa, but they do show a creative model for sign preservation highlighting the effects grants can have on wider policy and representing a good practice for combining incentives and regulations for greater impact in a community.

#### KEY FEATURES

- Grant program partnership between nonprofit and corporation funded by purchases of the company’s products.
- Amended zoning code to allow for signs over 50 years old to become conforming while creating a special classification allowing them to be relocated as well.

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413 City of Knoxville, “An Ordinance of the Council of the City of Knoxville to Amend the Knoxville City Code, Appendix B, ‘Zoning Regulations,’ Regarding Sign Regulations,” March 17, 2015, [www.knoxvilletn.gov/UserFiles/Servers/Server\\_109478/File/CityCouncil/sign/ordinance\\_mar2015.pdf](http://www.knoxvilletn.gov/UserFiles/Servers/Server_109478/File/CityCouncil/sign/ordinance_mar2015.pdf) (accessed March 2, 2020).

414 Ibid.

## TAKEAWAYS

- Neon is often perceived as limited to small businesses, but many corporations began as small businesses and may have both financial resources and an interest in giving back to their home communities. Do not overlook the possibility of corporate philanthropy in sign preservation.
- Allowing old signs to be relocated is an important tool for preserving signs that cannot stay in their original location. Best practice would combine this allowance for their relocation anywhere within the city with their ability to be adaptively reused (as in SLC).

## APPLICABILITY TO PORTLAND

- A preservation nonprofit could reach out to the corporate owners of one of the city's prominent signs to propose a similar initiative (i.e. McMenamins, Voodoo Doughnuts, Franz Bread, Jim Fisher Volvo, Ron Tonkin, Ace Hardware, Hooters).

Ultimately, each of the 20 programs highlighted here had a measure of success. While strategies differ, each story shows a place where citizens, organization, governments, or in the best cases, a combination of these, recognized the importance of their existing neon signs and worked hard over years or decades to proactively ensure they continue to light up city streets for years to come. Surveys, protections, and code amendments provide an understanding of where a city's signs are, allow for them to be legally used to meet modern needs, and provide protections for them when they are endangered. These are regulatory solutions, but allowances can only incentivize so much, and firm regulations can be difficult to enact. Financial incentives in the form of grants acknowledge the economic realities of the owners who are ultimately the stewards of neon signs. Before the political will to enact these changes can take hold, however, outreach is often necessary. This outreach can take the form of advocacy or IODC. When all three of these tactics come together to some degree in a combined approach, a city can truly create a culture where neon signs are appreciated, funded, encouraged, and protected. Synthesizing the lessons from these national best practices, the final chapter lays out an agenda for Portland policymakers and advocates for a comprehensive, unified, dedicated neon sign program that can help save the large collection of signs within the city before it is too late.

## CHAPTER 6

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PORTLAND

*“To retain and restore the classic neon signs that exist—and to walk under the colorful light of a neon night—is a dream worth having.”*

*- Al Barna, San Francisco Neon: Survivors and Lost Icons<sup>415</sup>*

Given the large but dwindling collection of neon signs in Portland; their layers of significance; the shortcomings of current efforts to protect them; and the precedent set by other cities nationwide, a comprehensive, dedicated neon sign preservation program in Portland is worth pursuing. The City has already set a precedent for active involvement in protecting neon signs through its ownership of the iconic White Stag sign, its encouragement of large neon signs in Broadway and Chinatown, and its creative Interstate Neon Sign District. Expanding and unifying these efforts in partnership with local nonprofits and sign advocates would further prevent the loss of the city’s important neon heritage. These efforts can dovetail in many ways with current City priorities surrounding the expansion of services to traditionally underserved populations.

Neon sign preservation efforts could propel Portland from a city that a few neon enthusiasts recognize to a national leader in sign preservation, enhancing sense of place, attracting tourism, helping local businesses, and bolstering tax revenue along the way. Portland has been fortunate to retain many neon signs already despite not having a dedicated neon sign protection program. If such a program were to become a priority, Portland would join the upper echelons of neon havens that it has the potential to be. The city is already blessed with the signs; it is time to formally acknowledge and protect them. This chapter recommends some actions that could be taken to achieve this goal.

While this chapter continues the paper’s breakdown of efforts into regulations, incentives, and advocacy and outreach, this study argues that the most effective approach to neon conservation combines all of these strategies in order to form a unified and comprehensive approach. The recommendations below present a range of proven best practices, minor improvements, and creative recommendations so

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415 Barna, *San Francisco Neon*, 134.

the reader is able to choose the options or alternatives that work best for their needs and resources. The implementation of these recommendations, even in part, would result in an improvement for the city's neon signs. Recommendations are meant to specifically address the issues with current local practice identified in Chapter 4 (reprinted in Table 4 below) and are based on findings outlined throughout the paper, primarily the best practices identified in the national survey in Chapter 5.

Each section begins with an overview of the general recommendation category followed by brief descriptions of individual recommendations. Many of these are footnoted with important details and qualifiers for readers looking for more depth or specifics. Recommendations are also outlined in Table 5 below. Finally, while these recommendations are specific to Portland, the majority of them can be implemented elsewhere just as effectively.

## **A. Regulations**

Regulations are necessary to ensure that sign preservation is legal and that the most significant neon signs are protected. While Portland's sign code is friendlier to neon than many, it is still imperfect, and its historic resource protections for signs are limited. A sign code is a valuable tool that can be used to enhance and protect the city's neon just as surely as it helped to remove it in years past. Many signs erected in the mid-century, when sign codes were common and friendly to neon, show what is possible when codes are carefully crafted with both thoughtful regulation and allowances for creativity in mind. The following recommendations seek to restore this balance to the modern sign code while incorporating new understandings of the need to protect historically significant elements of the built environment. They fall into three basic categories: a neon sign survey and vintage sign listing process, code changes, and additional recommendations.

### ***I. Vintage Sign Ordinance***

Perhaps the most important step the City could take to recognize the importance of its neon sign collection would be to follow national best practices and conduct a vintage sign survey and accompanying historic context, followed by implementation of a vintage sign ordinance – a special section of the code allowing for certain signs that meet certain criteria to receive special treatment without affecting the underlying base code. The survey in Chapter 5 shows that there are many ways this can be done. A common way is for businesses to apply for their sign to be listed, but this strategy relies on business owners to take the initiative and could leave many significant signs, including abandoned signs, in the lurch. A preferable practice would be to conduct a survey of existing neon signs and add signs directly to the list. Current rules in Oregon do not allow designation without owner consent, but this issue could be avoided by “listing” the signs on a sign inventory rather than “designating” them as historic landmarks.

An alternative could be developing a survey and then using it to guide outreach to business owners. Significant signs could be identified, and then owners could be approached and asked to consent to the listing of their sign. Any of these approaches, however, would go a long way in recognizing Portland's neon signs.

A survey could also be used to generate additional protections. New Mexico showed that MPS documentation of a collection of neon signs in the National Register is possible. A local thematic listing could be implemented in Portland as well, with a collection of signs nominated as local historic landmarks. This would be an incredibly powerful tool since designation is currently the only way the City can stop the demolition of a sign through demolition review. Either way, a historic context statement about Portland's neon signs should be developed along with the sign survey, or at the very least along with the update of the citywide survey. An MPS/thematic listing and context statement are not sufficient, however, because they only protect what is currently identified, even if they could help provide criteria for future identification. To provide recognition for all of Portland's significant neon signs, including those that are not yet significant but may prove to be in the future, a vintage sign ordinance offers the best way to create a new system that can identify and protect signs in perpetuity. This section identifies the key components of such a system.

*a. Structure*

- ***Separate register for signs.***<sup>416</sup> Signs listed under the ordinance would not be local landmarks under the current system, but part of an entirely new system written directly into the code.
- ***Moratorium on the removal of signs during the planning process.***<sup>417</sup> Crafting new ordinances can take time. A moratorium would ensure that all existing signs have the chance to survive.
- ***Methodology for how signs are listed.*** Ideally, signs could be automatically added to the inventory, but a next best option would be to identify significant signs through a survey and then approach those owners for permission to list their signs. Another option would be for owners to apply for their signs to be listed themselves. If a tiered system were established, as has been done

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416 A separate register is a component of all the ordinances surveyed in Chapter 5 and is recommended as best practice in Schwartz, "Conserving Historic Commercial Signs in Hollywood, California," along with a historic sign survey.

417 Identified as best practice by Kramer, "Preserving Historic Signs in the Commercial Landscape." As an example of the dangers of not enacting such a policy, eight signs were lost during the crafting of Tucson's ordinance.

in many cities, signs with the highest level of significance could be added automatically, while others could require owner consent or application.<sup>418</sup>

- ***Specific set of qualifying criteria.*** Review criteria provide the rationale for determining which signs qualify for listing. A number of excellent resources exist for determining criteria, including those used in SLC, St. Petersburg, and Tucson.<sup>419</sup> NPS Preservation Brief 25 also offers guidance on sign significance criteria.<sup>420</sup>
- ***Criterion of significance to a community.*** A sign's importance to a community should be a reason it can be listed. A sign that is "recognized as a local landmark because of its prominence and popular recognition as a focal point in the community" can be designated in this way, even if it don't meet more traditional criteria.<sup>421</sup> This criterion represents an important democratization of preservation practice.
- ***Reconsider traditional views on age requirements.*** If age requirements are deemed necessary, they should be tied to distance from the present (i.e. 35 years old) rather than set years (i.e. built

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418 Kramer's recommendation is to avoid owner consent if possible. There is a certain value to the buy-in owner consent entails, however, and a voluntary program would likely be an easier law to pass.

419 SLC criteria: Sign is not a billboard, retains or re-establishes historic character, and it meets four of six qualifiers: the sign was designed for the site, features unique graphics, enhances the identity of the neighborhood, is characteristic of its period, is integral to the building, or demonstrates craftsmanship.

St. Petersburg criteria: use of lettering to create a distinctive logo, features multiple colors of tubing, combines lettering and graphics to create memorable and eye-catching displays, enamel signboards enhanced and highlighted by neon tubing, examples of their era, historic materials and illumination style, structurally safe, retain integrity or be able to be restored, exemplify heritage, have extraordinary aesthetic qualities, be a rare or significant example.

Tucson criteria: had exposed lighting at one point; features materials representative of the original period of construction; non-rectangular and non-planar; safe or able to be made safe without altering the historic appearance; exemplifies heritage; has extraordinary aesthetic qualities; represents a unique business, local chain, rare example, or is noted in scholarly documentation; maintains integrity.

420 The "Retaining Historic Signs" section of Auer, *The Preservation of Historic Signs*. In his thesis Kramer recommends not creating a new set of criteria for signs but using those that are common to all historic resources as a way to connect signs to other resources. This approach may not be able to sufficiently recognize the unique reasons why signs can have significance, however. He also recommends using technology, craftsmanship, design of the period, and aesthetics if new criteria need to be created. While progressive for their time in 1989, these criteria have since been supplanted by more comprehensive approaches that better serve the needs of signs.

421 See Chapter 5.A.II.d, "Miami, FL," of this paper for more details. City of Miami. "Code of Ordinances."

before 1960). This allows for the continual addition of newer significant signs to the inventory. The age used should be less than 50 years old.<sup>422</sup>

- ***Tiers, if necessary.*** Tiers categorizing signs based on age, replica status, relocation needs, or other criteria could provide the leeway necessary to provide different levels of protection while still offering some benefits to all.<sup>423</sup>
- ***Required treatment plans, if listing relies on owner consent.*** Treatment plans help show qualifying criteria have been met, ensure critical owner buy-in, and provide for continued maintenance. An agreement should run with the deed that the sign cannot be removed for a set period of time. At a minimum, a set of maintenance standards should be tied to listing.<sup>424</sup>
- ***Decisions made by an informed commission as part of a public process.***<sup>425</sup> Listing decisions should be made by individuals with an understanding of what makes both historic resources and neon signs significant. This could be the Landmarks Commission or a special sign commission, but likely not a more general design commission. The public should also be part of the process since some signs may qualify because of importance to the local community.
- ***Systems to continually add signs to the inventory.*** If a survey is conducted, systems should be established to ensure that future sign reviews are actively identifying eligible signs so they can be added to the inventory, including signs that may have been missed in the initial survey.<sup>426</sup>

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422 Most of the best practice cities identified in Chapter 5 follow this policy, using 40, 30, or 25 years as the cutoff. Miami does not appear to take age into consideration at all, recognizing that a sign can become a community icon and be worth saving even after just a few years. Kramer's thesis also recommends not using age as a consideration.

423 This might be akin to the difference between historic and conservation landmarks. At least one city implementing this strategy, Tucson, notes that it may overcomplicate the system and is considering altering it.

424 This is identified as best practice by both Kramer and Schwartz, though Kramer does not recommend enforcing it strictly. He notes that noncompliant signs could just lose their listing status and the benefits it offers, but in extreme cases the City could force payment of a fine through a property tax lien. Requiring a treatment plan if a sign is automatically listed without owner consent, however, would place an undue burden on a property owner.

425 Schwartz recommends this as best practice.

426 This could potentially be accomplished by adding an age "trigger" to the permitting process. When a permit to demolish or alter a sign over a qualifying age is received, City officials could provide the owner with information on the vintage sign inventory process and benefits. This approach would catch signs as they are in process and ensure that every owner of a potentially eligible sign is aware of the benefits of listing before they opt to remove or inappropriately alter their sign.



*b. Bonuses*

A vintage sign ordinance must provide some kind of special treatment for listed signs to encourage listing and balance out land use restrictions.

- ***Exemption from base sign code.*** Listed signs should have a special set of rules that recognizes their significance.<sup>427</sup> Alternatively, signs could receive bonuses of size, illumination, etc. These bonuses would need to be sufficiently compelling to entice owners to list their signs if application was voluntary.
- ***Exemption from maximum sign area allotments.***<sup>428</sup> This bonus allows the property to have more signage if desired and ensures a listed sign is never lost to replacement. Portland has already showed a willingness to move in this direction through its Interstate Neon Sign District.
- ***Allowances for rehabilitation.*** This may be the single most important factor in crafting a successful program, and it has been identified as such in Tucson.<sup>429</sup> Businesses must be allowed to make minor modifications to signs so they work for their current needs. This can be done without difficulty by creating criteria to ensure character-defining features are maintained and is common practice in the wider preservation world. Criteria should be established to ensure that changes keep character-defining features such as letter style and material.<sup>430</sup> Allowing too much change could alter a sign to the point that it may arguably have been better preserved in a museum.<sup>431</sup> For this reason, all decisions should be made based on established criteria by a review process rather than a rigid set of standards.<sup>432</sup>
- ***Allowances for restoration to an earlier look.*** Some signs have been altered over the years to a point where they have lost integrity. Owners who desire to restore their sign to a documented,

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427 Kramer also recommends exemption rather than just bonuses.

428 This tool was identified in Tucson as key to the program's success.

429 The national leader in preservation practice, NPS, has also allowed rehabilitation for recipients of its Route 66 Cost-Share Grant.

430 SLC and Tucson offer good examples of such criteria. SLC criteria: retain shape, size, typography, use of color, illustrative elements, character of illumination, character of animation. Tucson criteria: retain materials, letter size, font, color

431 Seltzer, *Vintage Signs of America*. Seltzer expands in a January 10, 2020, email: "**Signs left in place** is a romantic concept but they are at **HIGH** risk of being repurposed and ruined by the next business: the panels scraped and repainted and new plastic letters stuck on with the new biz names. Dozens of signs are defiled in this way every year. Beautiful porcelain panels with filigree details -- destroyed with cheap paint" (emphases original).

432 Kramer identifies this as best practice.

significant, historic look should be able to list the restored sign. This allowance would encourage important signs that have been inappropriately altered to be resurrected.

- ***Allowances for reconstruction.*** Some important signs have been lost entirely. Owners who desire to reconstruct a documented, significant, historic sign in its original location should be able to list it.<sup>433</sup> This has already been allowed in Portland on theaters including the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall and the Academy Theater.
- ***Allowances for relocation.*** Relocation allowances protect signs when they are endangered or their business moves. Ideally, a listed sign should be able to be relocated anywhere in the city but could be limited to the same neighborhood or areas with old sign clusters.<sup>434</sup> At the very least, it should be allowed for businesses that are forced out of their property because of factors outside of their control, such as gentrification, as is the case in SF.<sup>435</sup> Portland has already shown a willingness to embrace relocation allowances in the Interstate Neon Sign District.
- ***Reduced administrative fees and processing time.*** If alterations are needed to listed signs, a quicker process and especially lower fees than those required for unlisted signs would be helpful.
- ***Plaque.*** Providing a small plaque noting that the sign is part of the vintage sign program would provide prestige, interpret the sign's importance, and create awareness of the program.
- ***Promotion.*** The City or a local nonprofit should ensure the list of vintage signs is publicly available and promote listing to businesses and the general public as a prestigious honor. Like a legacy business program, this would promote the program as a whole and drive additional economic activity to listed properties.<sup>436</sup>

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433 This process should be able to dovetail with a process for rehabilitation. If, for example, an owner wanted to reconstruct a historic motel sign that once advertised a pool, but the motel no longer has a pool, they should be able to change the word "pool" to "open."

434 The "sign cluster" limit is especially weak, however. It exists in Tucson and has resulted in the loss of some significant signs.

435 A review process would be necessary to ensure signs do not overwhelm neighbors but should work flexibly with owners to find workable solutions that allow the sign to be retained.

436 The plaque and promotion combination is being tried in Tucumcari's new Landmark Historic Sign Ordinance.

### *c. Protections*

- ***Demolition and sale review or delay.***<sup>437</sup> Demolition or sale review would give listed signs the same protections as designated historic resources and ensure that signs cannot be demolished, sold to collectors, or otherwise removed from the community without review and a public process. An alternative would be a delay, ideally 90-120 days, during which time alternative solutions for preserving or relocating the sign within the public view could be identified, ideally with active involvement from the City or a nonprofit.
- ***Listed signs cannot be removed from the list without review.*** This restriction would ensure that a listed sign maintains protections except under exceptional circumstances, such as proof of irreconcilable financial hardship. New owners would thus be prohibited from simply deciding they no longer wanted to be listed so they could destroy or sell the sign.<sup>438</sup>
- ***City seizure as a last resort.*** In dire situations where a business does not maintain a listed sign or a property has been vacant for an extended period of time, the City should have the power to either compel maintenance through a property tax lien or take ownership of the sign to fix it, sell it to an owner who agrees to maintain it on public view, or add it to a local sign park.

## ***II. Code Changes***

Paramount to the success of any other effort to protect neon signs is the legal ability to do so. Incentives and advocacy and outreach do no good if the code language does not allow neon signs to be saved. Further, while a designation process can impact the most significant signs, only alterations to the code itself have the potential to make sweeping changes to the neon sign environment across the board. The perfect code is an elusive animal, needing to balance both efficient processes that make neon sign preservation attractive and regulations ensuring signs are not lost. These recommendations attempt to capture that delicate balance.

- ***Make existing nonconforming signs legal by right.*** Making vested signs legal by right would remove the time, financial burden, and uncertainty of the required variance process without removing the important protections offered by the permitting or land use review processes. The

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<sup>437</sup> Kramer and Schwartz both identify this as best practice. It has been implemented in SF and Tucumcari.

<sup>438</sup> This policy is practiced in SF and Burbank.

code can effectively deter unwanted new signs without forcing changes to existing signs (such as reconstructions or rehabilitation) to face the uncertainty of the variance process.

- ***Create more Special Sign Areas.*** Portland’s Special Areas of Broadway, Chinatown, and Interstate are good starts for creating unique sign rules for areas with high sign concentrations. They are not the only areas with high concentrations, however.<sup>439</sup>
- ***Strengthen the rules governing Special Sign Areas.*** Broadway and Chinatown should be written directly into the code. The language governing Interstate should be amended so signs that remain in place don’t count toward maximum sign allowances and to explicitly encourage sign preservation.<sup>440</sup> Within DOZs, Design Review should be required for all Special Area signs, not just those greater than 32 sq.ft. Additional protections are also warranted. For example, nonconforming signs within these areas should be legal by right and character-defining signs allowed to be restored, reconstructed, or relocated without counting toward a site’s maximum sign area allowance.<sup>441</sup> Character-defining signs could have demolition protections, or their preservation incentivized by waiving administrative fees or through the implementation of a wider points-based development approval process that awards extra points for their retention.
- ***Remove limits on how long signs can be down for repair.***<sup>442</sup> This rule already exists in the Interstate Neon Sign District and should be extended universally. If a sign was legal when it came down, it should still be legal when it goes back up, even if it took more than the currently allowable six months to repair. This provides the time necessary for larger repair projects.<sup>443</sup>
- ***Provide better allowances for sign reconstructions.*** Currently, if a sign is in such poor condition that it must be rebuilt, it is considered a new sign and must go through the time and expense of

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439 Ideally, signs should be protected everywhere, not just in certain areas, but creating more Special Areas is a good option if widespread change is not viable.

440 This would provide needed benefits to those signs that are not forced to move (the only signs in the district protected by the current rules).

441 These areas already encourage and allow signs that would not be allowed elsewhere but still force them to go through the variance process when the result is virtually a foregone conclusion. Also, signs are already allowed to be relocated within the Interstate Corridor, but only here and only certain signs.

442 Title 32.36.020.H.1 currently limits signs to being down for six months before they lose legal nonconforming status. Thus, this recommendation would be unnecessary if the recommendation to make nonconforming signs legal by right was implemented.

443 Salt Lake City’s vintage sign ordinance provides a model for how to apply this policy to signs that meet certain criteria, if not across the board.

the permitting/land use review process. A sign that looks exactly like an existing one but better (because it is newly fabricated instead of crumbling to pieces) need not be considered a new sign if it mimics the existing sign in look and materials. If an exact replica of a legal sign is created, it should be legal too.<sup>444</sup>

- ***Provide leniency in review of restored or relocated signs.*** Restorations to a previous look should continue to be considered new signs in order to ensure historical accuracy. Permitting, land use review, and variance process, should treat restorations favorably, however. Similarly, relocations should continue to go through a review process to ensure they meet the code requirements of their new location. However, reviewers should provide leniency in approving such moves, especially if the business was forced out of its previous location.<sup>445</sup>
- ***Distinguish neon animation from other changing image signs.*** Current regulations in Title 32.32.030.D provide no way of distinguishing between the various ways signs can “move.” Traditional neon animation is entirely different from modern LED picture screens, however, and code language should acknowledge this.<sup>446</sup>
- ***Designate neon signs as historic resources.*** Currently the strongest protection for signs in Portland is through designation as a historic resource. Designating signs as historic landmarks would be a relatively simple way to extend existing protections and land use review to significant neon signs. It could also provide a rationale for offering additional incentives to designated signs, such as grants or tax breaks.<sup>447</sup>

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444 Doing away with the permitting/land use review process for reconstructions would be detrimental, however, as it is the only way to ensure the replica sufficiently matches the existing sign. The process in such cases should be streamlined and fees reduced. A replica sign should be in a different class than truly new signs and require less time and money to process.

445 If, for example, a business with an iconic neon sign is forced out of its property because of gentrification or rent hikes, the vintage sign that defines that business should be able to move with it.

446 Albuquerque’s code provides excellent example language for creating a separate class for neon animated signs: “A neon sign that uses changes in luminance in a sequential or radial manner to produce what appears to be movement of an element of the animated sign. Flashing of a sign or flashing by its elements that are not sequential or radial changes in luminance do not qualify as animation of a sign. Any animation should reflect historic neon animation design (lighting and/or physical movement) and not incorporate electronic sign animation” (City of Albuquerque, “Central Avenue Neon Sign Design Overlay Zone”).

447 This could be done on a one-off basis, but a more efficient way would be through a survey (or inclusion of signs in the upcoming citywide survey update). Signs could then be listed under the current protection system, or it could tie into a new vintage sign ordinance.

- ***Specifically note in the sign code that signs can be character-defining features of buildings.*** Writing this into the code is a proactive step recognizing the potential significance of signs and sending an important reminder to property owners and those evaluating cultural resources.<sup>448</sup>
- ***Create special classifications for special sign typologies.*** San Francisco has a special section of code with special rules for historic theater signs. Portland has a large number of historic theaters, and a similar approach is warranted here. This could also extend to motel signs, another unique historic sign type abundant in Portland. Such a system could help prevent the too common replacement of these iconic signs with backlit plastic.
- ***Amend the proposed Historic Resource Code changes to better protect neon signs.*** Make explicit that attached signs are part of a primary resource and that freestanding signs can be primary resources themselves if they are listed independently.<sup>449</sup> Eliminate language requiring all signs to go through Type I review instead of the stronger reviews needed for buildings.<sup>450</sup> This would ensure that all signs have the strongest possible reasonable protections. At a minimum, all staff who process Type I reviews should be well trained on the value of historic signs.<sup>451</sup>
- ***Encourage rehabilitation of existing signs in the Design Review and variance processes.*** In the Design Review and variance processes, there should be language encouraging retention of the character of signs while allowing for wording changes to advertise the current business. Otherwise, the incentive is to replace the sign.<sup>452</sup> Staff who are processing most of these reviews should be properly trained on their applicability to neon signs so they apply the guidelines in a way that is friendly to sign retention.
- ***Improve the Community Design Standards.***<sup>453</sup> The CDS are an option for many signs and speed up the review process, but their prescriptive nature leaves no room for interpretation and does

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448 San Francisco's sign code does this.

449 This would leave only freestanding signs associated with a listed primary resource classified as "accessory" structures.

450 Except for freestanding accessory structure signs associated with conservation landmarks/districts, which should keep a requirement for Type I review so they have some protection.

451 An alternative if a vintage sign inventory is created would be to use a higher review for listed signs and have unlisted signs go through the Type I review. Alternatively, signs over a certain age threshold could receive a higher-level review.

452 This rehabilitation approach may be even more appropriate in design zones than historic zones. NPS has shown a willingness to allow this rehabilitation, as have many cities nationwide.

453 While the proposed new Design Standards would replace CDS outside of conservation landmarks/districts, current plans call for the CDS to live on within these conservation zones.

nothing to encourage the preservation of significant old signs. A bold fix that fits with their standardized nature would be to simply require the retention of every sign that has reached a certain age. Signs could always go through the longer review process if owners did not like this option.<sup>454</sup>

- ***Improve the proposed new Design Standards.*** The proposed points-based CDS replacement system does not live up to the potential it has to protect historic signs. The Old Buildings/History standards should include the option to earn a point for retaining historic signage or at least mention signage as a façade element to retain. Such standards do little good if they rarely come into play, however. Remodeling projects of all sizes should be required to earn a point from the Older Buildings/History standards, rather than making them mostly optional and only applying them to major remodels. The current 50-year threshold before Older Buildings/History standards apply should be eliminated so as not to actively incentivize projects involving younger properties to discount preservation altogether and seek points elsewhere. The standard to preserve existing facades should be strengthened to require keeping more than 50% of a façade (potentially including historic signage as a feature that must be kept) and apply to buildings of all sizes.<sup>455</sup>
- ***Amend the proposed Portland Citywide Design Guidelines to better protect all neon signs.*** The proposed replacement for Community Design Guidelines is generally friendly to neon signs but is not direct enough. As written, developers could still easily justify removing or dramatically altering existing signs. Guideline 4 encourages integration of on-site features and even directly calls out “architectural elements, such as sculptural neon signage,” but this could be interpreted as applying only to certain neon signs and should be made more general, perhaps by changing the accomplishment strategy to read: “Maintaining a site’s uniqueness by repurposing character-defining elements, such as neon signage and architectural canopies.” Additionally, the accomplishment strategy encouraging retention of character-defining details during storefront retrofits should be amended by simply adding vintage signage to the list of details.
- ***Consider alternate processes involving neighborhood associations.*** Portland’s famous neighborhood association system could provide valuable partners for sign preservation. If, for

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454 An alternative could be to require specific character-defining features of a sign to be retained universally (letter style, material, etc.).

455 If a better system is developed, it could be put in place throughout the city to incentivize neon even outside of DOZs.

example, a proposed sign project sought and received support from the local neighborhood association, it could qualify for a quicker, less-costly review process at the city level, saving time and money and giving a stronger voice to communities.

### ***III. Additional Regulatory Recommendations***

Additional regulatory recommendations do not fall neatly into the categories of code changes or a vintage sign ordinance but are nonetheless important.

- ***Update the citywide Historic Resources Inventory to include signs and provide context.*** The updated HRI should explicitly look for significant signs and note them as important elements in their own right, separate from the buildings they may be attached to. In addition, a context statement on Portland's neon signs should be developed to call attention to their importance and provide guidelines for determining their significance.
- ***Create a Conservation District of neon signs.***<sup>456</sup> Creating a conservation district to recognize neon signs in an area such as Interstate or Chinatown would fit into the City's established structure, set an important precedent that signs are worth preserving, and provide the protection of demolition review to contributing signs.<sup>457</sup>
- ***Actively consider effects on historic neon signs during City-led Section 106 processes.*** This is especially important with the expansion of the light rail system to Barbur and Powell Boulevards, which contain many historic neon signs that stand to be endangered by the rising property values, increased development pressure, and demand for density light rail will bring. Organizations such as PDX Neon should be consulting parties to these processes.

## **B. Incentives**

Financial incentives are the jumpstarters that ultimately make sign preservation possible in a capitalist society. While legal protections can be put in place for the most significant neon signs, and some signs are owned by municipalities or nonprofits, the overwhelming majority of neon signs are owned by private businesses that need the sign to provide value relative to its costs. Signs are thus

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<sup>456</sup> The Historic Resources Code Project Discussion Draft already notes this as a theoretical possibility.

<sup>457</sup> One of Miami's criteria for designating historic signs provides a rationale for how contributing signs could be determined: "Assist in defining the character of a district as for example marquees in theater districts, or prominent neon signs associated with the proliferation of motels dependent on the tourism industry" (City of Miami. "Code of Ordinances").



usually market-based objects, and any complete neon sign promotion program must consider the economic realities faced by sign owners. This is where incentives can be helpful – providing owners with the impetus to keep their old neon signs not just a sentimental gesture but as a wise business decision.

The cost of restoring and maintaining neon can be significant. While certainly not the exclusive realm of the well-heeled, neon is an energy-consuming artisan craft that can be more expensive than alternatives. Some signs require removal for proper conservation, and the cost of removing the sign (plus providing a temporary substitute during conservation) can be high. Even if they don't need to come down, some neon signs are in difficult to reach places that require a crane to access, and that crane costs money.<sup>458</sup> Sign expert Debra Jane Seltzer notes that most neon signs nationwide are “at barely surviving mom & pop shops that struggle to make ends meet & have no ability to pay for restoring or maintaining neon signs,” making grant money not just a nice incentive for many sign owners but the only way they can possibly afford to conserve their signs.<sup>459</sup> She cautions, however, that financial assistance must be accompanied by maintenance requirements: “Restoring signs only gets you so far. Without a maintenance contract, only a few years or a decade later, it's like the restoration never happened. So, smart city funding should allow for that.”<sup>460</sup> This section provides recommendations for financial incentives for neon signs in Portland in three categories: improvements to the current PIP grant, recommendations for the City, and recommendations for nonprofits.<sup>461</sup>

### ***I. PIP Grant Improvements***

Debra Jane Seltzer heralds 50/50 grants as “miraculous and rare situations.”<sup>462</sup> Prosper Portland's PIP grants are a valuable tool that continues to make a miraculous difference for many of the city's neon signs. Portland is fortunate to have such a program and should continue to recognize its value. A few small changes could help the program provide even bigger impacts to neon signs.

- ***Expand the reach.*** The greatest downfall of the PIP program is its limited geographic scope. This is the only financial assistance available for neon sign conservation in the city, so signs that are not within defined URAs have no options. The City should fund the program as much as

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<sup>458</sup> Greenstein, *PreserveCast* interview with Nick Redding.

<sup>459</sup> Debra Jane Seltzer, email exchange, January 10, 2020.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid. Schwartz also identifies maintenance contracts as best practice in her thesis.

<sup>461</sup> Note that one area outside of the scope of my research is the potential of Opportunity Zones. Many Portland neon signs fall within Opportunity Zones, a new, still largely untested Federal economic revitalization tool. Further study into their applicability to neon should be explored.

<sup>462</sup> Seltzer, email exchange.

possible and Prosper Portland should expand it as much as possible, at the very least making it available in every URA.

- ***Provide greater encouragement for neon sign conservation.***<sup>463</sup> The program has no guidelines encouraging any particular use for funds, which could easily be used to tear down and replace an existing neon sign. If the City wanted to focus energy on neon signs, they could provide extra funding or a lower match for projects involving neon or the retention of historic fabric in general.<sup>464</sup> At the very least, grant management staff should be trained to encourage the retention of existing neon signs among recipients.
- ***Focus on legacy businesses.*** More and more cities are establishing legacy business programs that recognize longstanding local businesses and offer promotion and protection for them in the face of increased development pressure and gentrification. Portland does not yet have such a program, but it could provide similar benefits by prioritizing PIP applications from established businesses that have been part of a community for a certain number of years. Because many neon signs are part of such longstanding local businesses, the signs would benefit as a result.
- ***Do more outreach.*** More work should be done to ensure that owners of old neon signs are aware that the program is available to them. An advocacy organization like AHC or PDX Neon could help with some of this legwork.<sup>465</sup>

## ***II. Additional City Recommendations***

The PIP Grant already makes Portland a leader in neon sign preservation incentives since many cities do not offer any financial assistance for neon signs. Nevertheless, there are additional steps the City could take to reach those signs left out of eligibility for the PIP grant. Many of these ideas are new and would represent bold leadership by the City in setting a course for creative neon sign preservation.

- ***Tap into CLG grants.*** As a CLG, Portland qualifies for up to \$11,500 bi-annually for preservation projects. A portion of this funding could be earmarked for neon sign preservation and would provide a low-cost, high-impact way to spread the value of this non-competitive grant

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<sup>463</sup> There is precedent for special rules. For example, current rules rightly prioritize funding for traditionally underserved populations. They also allow for more funding and a lower match in the Interstate Corridor.

<sup>464</sup> SF has done this with its Neon A-Z partnership with SF Neon.

<sup>465</sup> If a vintage sign survey is conducted and a list of significant signs developed, these signs could be the focus of attention.

across the city. It could be used to conduct a historic sign survey and draft a new ordinance to protect the identified signs, for public education, or for staff training.<sup>466</sup>

- ***Think creatively about funding.*** Funding neon sign preservation need not divert City financial resources away from other worthy projects. Outside funding like HUD Community Development Block Grants can be tapped into, or new revenue streams could be developed such as a Historic Resource Mitigation Demolition Fund. Under such a scheme, developers would pay into a fund when they legally demolish historic properties, with the proceeds going toward preservation or designation of other properties. It would function like a financial version of the city's existing deconstruction ordinance, disincentivize demolitions, and fund worthy preservation efforts.
- ***Create a neighborhood association sign grant.*** The City could create a new neighborhood association neon sign grant program, with a focus on underserved neighborhoods. These groups could work with local businesses to apply for grants. Such a program would ensure community buy-in, create a broader awareness of the value of neon signs, and provide a low-cost way to revitalize neighborhoods.
- ***Provide property tax benefits for conserving neon signs.*** Since Oregon has no state historic preservation tax credit, and the Federal credit cannot be used for signage, Multnomah County could allow a percentage of funds used on neon sign conservation to be deducted from local property taxes as a way to incentivize this work.
- ***Provide direct financial support for old signs.*** The City could directly support signs over a certain age. Similar in concept to a guaranteed basic income, this would be a small stipend for property owners who commit to maintaining their old sign and would provide incentive to keep old signs rather than replace them.<sup>467</sup>
- ***Support business types that tend to have neon signs.*** Because signs are often in danger when their businesses close or are forced to move, supporting business types that often have neon signs – such as restaurants, lodging, theaters, and car washes – could help the signs themselves.

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<sup>466</sup> Burbank used CLG funds to create their Historic Sign Program.

<sup>467</sup> A more limited version of this idea would be to apply the benefit only to signs identified through a vintage sign survey.

- ***Provide grants to neon sign companies.*** The supply side of neon faces many challenges. Portland could help make neon more viable by influencing the market through grants, loans, or other financing to sign companies that do a certain percentage of business in neon. Because sign companies often have a degree of leeway in determining the best sign for a client, rewarding companies for encouraging neon would increase demand, provide work for skilled artisans, and make glass bending a more attractive career choice.
- ***Incentivize green power sources.*** Electric utility PGE offers the Green Source program where customers can pay slightly more to draw all of their power from renewable sources. Portland could pay this upcharge for neon signs' power bills. This strategy would increase demand for green power sources and incentivize a green neon technology.

### ***III. Nonprofit Recommendations***

Cities are not the only option for funding neon sign conservation. Often nonprofits have more flexibility and are in a better position to leverage funds with advocacy campaigns. This section offers recommendations for how nonprofit preservation advocates can provide financial assistance for neon signs.

- ***Apply for grants.*** While there are few grants directed exclusively at neon signs, many grants outlined in Chapter 4 can be applied to neon signs. Nonprofits should seek passthrough grants that could be redistributed toward local sign priorities or provide technical assistance to business owners applying for other grants, such as the PIP Grant.
- ***Operate a neon sign grant program based on popular vote.*** A popular vote grant program would allow individual community members to directly decide which signs are conserved and embraces the bottom-up preservation practice that is becoming more common in the field.<sup>468</sup>
- ***Partner with local corporations.*** A local company with a neon sign of its own could run a promotion where a certain percentage of sales over a given time would be donated to a nonprofit

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<sup>468</sup> This would be a valuable way for traditional preservation nonprofits to expand their audience to welcome young adults and others who value neon signs but may not be engaged by traditional preservation or consider themselves preservationists. The National Trust for Historic Preservation's Partners in Preservation grant program offers a model that can be duplicated at the local level. The popularity of Casa Grande's winning neon sign park project shows that people nationwide have an interest in the restoration of neon signs.

to be distributed to local applicants for sign conservation. Donors could also contribute directly to the fund through the nonprofit. This strategy takes some of the burden of fundraising and promotion off nonprofits and provides an opportunity for good corporate citizens to give back to their community.<sup>469</sup>

### C. Advocacy and Outreach

Finally, good policies and financial incentives are of little use if people do not understand the value of preserving neon signs. This is the role of advocacy and outreach. The most effective neon sign conservation campaigns involve a strong advocacy and outreach component that builds the groundswell to compel action in other areas. For this reason, advocacy and outreach are often the first tactics employed in a preservation strategy. These efforts can start with a single committed organization or even a lone committed individual. These lone actors can make significant change, but only inasmuch as they can rally others to the cause. Thus, advocacy and outreach are rarely effective on their own. They are necessary but insufficient factors in an impactful neon sign policy.

Advocacy and outreach can take many forms. In its simplest form, everyone can be an advocate for neon signs. Nathan Marsak reminds us in *Los Angeles Neon* that “sometimes all it takes is one customer chatting up a shop owner about the ‘cool sign’ to save it.”<sup>470</sup> Spending money at businesses that have neon signs and letting the proprietors know that you love their sign and are shopping there because of it is a powerful strategy. Business owners want every competitive advantage they can get, and they will be more likely to keep their neon sign if they see it as such. Advocacy and outreach can also be through IODC, booklets, campaigns, sign parks, and more. The limit is really just capacity and creativity.

Aside from the general benefits of neon described in Chapter 3, efforts related to neon sign preservation are also an excellent way for traditional preservation nonprofits to engage younger generations and others who enjoy neon but may not be otherwise engaged in preservation. They also represent low-hanging fruit and provide a strong return on investment. Restoring neon is a cost-effective way to generate big visual and economic impact for less money than would generally be needed for a

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<sup>469</sup> This strategy would follow the model established by Knox Heritage and JFG Coffee in Knoxville. Large local businesses or corporations with a local presence that may be considered for such a promotion (based on their use of neon) could be McMenamins, Voodoo Doughnuts, Franz Bread (no longer has neon but does have a similar quirky rotating rooftop bread sign), Jim Fisher Volvo, Ron Tonkin Automotive, Ace Hardware, or Hooters.

<sup>470</sup> Marsak, *Los Angeles Neon*, 10.

building restoration. This section makes a number of recommendations for creative advocacy and outreach programs, including sign parks, that could be implemented in Portland.

### ***I. General Advocacy and Outreach Recommendations***

The single most important recommendation for advocacy and outreach efforts in Portland is that they be coordinated. The networking necessary to facilitate this is already underway with the formation of the PDX Neon group but must grow to include more members of the sign industry, other local advocates, existing preservation nonprofits, and government representatives. There is a sizable base of support for neon preservation efforts in Portland, but most supporters are not connected to one another. Further, while many individuals within city government support neon sign preservation, there is currently no official backing by the City. Neither have preservation nonprofits been engaged in the issue. By pulling these resources together, PDX Neon could become the rallying point for citywide preservation efforts and technical assistance. A large, unified constituency urging action and providing knowledge on neon sign preservation best practices could elevate the issue to a level of prominence and spur action in the city. These general advocacy and outreach recommendations are split into those best undertaken by a dedicated neon group, an existing preservation nonprofit, or either.

#### ***a. Dedicated Neon Group***

- ***Harness the power of crowdfunding.*** Crowdfunding campaigns can be a valuable tool for preservationists since they allow individuals to contribute to specific needs and are able to engage a generation that is often reluctant to join membership organizations. Supported by a strong promotional campaign, crowdfunding the preservation of a popular endangered sign in the community could help preserve the sign and catalyze a base of support for signs across the city.<sup>471</sup>
- ***Expand neon sign tours.*** Kate Widdows already leads one popular neon walking tour in Portland, but expanding options to include additional neighborhoods could make repeat visits more likely and bring awareness to neon outside of the downtown core. One method might be to work with an organization like AHC, who already sponsors many architectural walking tours and

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<sup>471</sup> This strategy has been used in San Jose, and to a lesser extent already in Portland, to preserve important endangered signs.

lectures, in a profit-sharing agreement that would allow more people to be exposed to the tours while bringing new audiences into the AHC fold.<sup>472</sup>

*b. Existing Preservation Nonprofit*

- ***Sponsor neon events.*** Existing fundraising galas could be neon themed or feature a special push to raise money for a neon conservation project. Individual behind-the-scenes visits to businesses with neon signs or signmakers themselves could also be added to existing programming, with funds used to directly support neon sign conservation grants. Large public events like concerts or festivals to raise support could also be considered.<sup>473</sup>
- ***Add neon signs to Most Endangered lists.*** Restore Oregon curates an annual Most Endangered list as a way of focusing public attention on the perilous situation of beloved places. Portland's neon signs could be added to this list to call attention to their current lack of protections and constant threat because of development pressure.<sup>474</sup>
- ***Incorporate neon signs into an existing museum collection.*** AHC, with its large existing collection of local architectural elements, would be a natural place to begin a local collection of neon signs. These would complement the existing collection nicely and attract a new audience to the organization's museum exhibits.<sup>475</sup>
- ***Partner with the National Neon Sign Museum.*** Portland is only an hour and a half from the National Neon Sign Museum in The Dalles. Restore Oregon is especially well positioned to partner with the preservation efforts of the museum, which is run by longtime Portland area signmaker David Benko. Restore Oregon could promote the museum's events and share its

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472 Guided neon sign tours have been incredibly popular and effective in raising awareness of the value of neon and its place in the cityscape in Los Angeles and SF.

473 Pocatello has used large fundraising events to support IODC efforts.

474 This strategy was used in Colorado by statewide nonprofit Colorado Preservation in its 2014 listing of the Neon Signs of Colfax Avenue, which has helped create awareness and save some of the signs there.

475 The Oregon Historical Society would be another potential local recipient. Museums should never be a first choice, since they would likely not be on permanent display, but they would serve as a valuable safeguard against complete loss and provide at least some opportunity for future public viewing.

resources with the rest of the state. The museum could serve as a potential final destination for the most important neon signs around the state that cannot be saved elsewhere.<sup>476</sup>

*c. Dedicated Neon Group or Existing Preservation Nonprofit*

- **Target neon sign owners.** A brochure explaining in plain language why neon signs should be saved and providing resources for how to do so could be supplemented with offers for design assistance showing owners what their signs could look like if they were re-lit or returned to a historic look. Getting such a tool in the hands of every neon sign owning business in the city would be an incredible outreach tool and empower owners by letting them know they are not alone in their preservation efforts. Additionally, a Portland nonprofit could make it a priority to help guide businesses through the PIP Grant process. This simple work would be a light lift but make all the difference in the world to busy sign owners who may be unaware of the program or unfamiliar with the application process.<sup>477</sup>
- **Curate an art exhibit.** An exhibit of neon visual art or one pairing historic and contemporary images could help a wide audience understand the cultural and artistic value of neon. Archival photography and exhibit space could come from the City Archives, the Oregon Historical Society, Multnomah County Public Library, AHC, the Portland Art Museum, or elsewhere. The exhibit could also lead to the production of a catalog.<sup>478</sup>
- **Create a neon sign tour booklet.** A Portland tour booklet would document important signs and could help launch a larger awareness campaign, increase neon tourism, and prompt city decisionmakers to take notice. Books could be sold at local cultural institutions and the many stores promoting local artisan culture and distributed complimentary to decisionmakers.<sup>479</sup>

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<sup>476</sup> No matter what the partnership looked like, the museum's narrow focus on neon signs and Restore Oregon's broader statewide preservation efforts could benefit from bringing both organizations' strengths to the table. The power of this convergence is evident in Tucson with the incredibly effective partnership between the THPF and the Ignite Sign Art Museum.

<sup>477</sup> A brochure was produced by the New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance. The Route 66 Association of Missouri helped shepherd business owners through sign grant application processes.

<sup>478</sup> San Jose and SF have both seen success with neon art exhibits, and SF published a successful catalog as a result of their partnership with the public library.

<sup>479</sup> Tour booklets have been used in Tulsa, Tucson, and San Jose. The signs and creative talent in Portland are more than enough for such a project to be successful. Kate Widdows has already produced a valuable fold-out poster with a map and addresses of many of Portland's neon signs.



- ***Produce a coffee table book.*** Regional neon coffee table books provide a “historic sign survey lite” that visually documents the current state of neon in a city, raises popular awareness, and instills pride of place. Such a book in Portland would enhance the city’s reputation as a neon haven and prompt decisionmakers to take notice.<sup>480</sup>
- ***Consider an IODC approach.*** IODC programs are especially valuable as tools for economic revitalization and cultural preservation and could be targeted to areas like Albina or East Portland. One sign per year might be selected for restoration based on a competitive process involving neighborhood associations to ensure strong local buy in.<sup>481</sup>

## ***II. Sign Park***

Sign parks are an increasingly popular way to preserve neon signs in the public realm where they can be enjoyed by everyone. They are less preferable than preservation *in situ* but can provide an excellent alternative to demolition or admission-based museum display. In addition, sign parks are excellent placemaking tools that enhance communities with public art, preserve local history and culture, and raise awareness and appreciation for neon throughout the city. Sign parks have spurred economic revitalization, drawn tourists, and become major arts and culture hubs in large cities like Edmonton down to tiny communities like Pomeroy, WA.

Portland already casually explored this strategy during the creation of the Interstate Neon Sign District. City code exempts public art from the sign code, so even if nothing changes in the city’s sign code, neon signs could be classified as public art for the purposes of creating a sign park. This strategy would also open up entirely new funding sources geared toward public art and placemaking as well as arts-focused partners like the Regional Arts and Culture Council. Many sign parks sit on donated land, and a Portland sign park could be a valuable alternative or complement to an oversized parking lot or otherwise underused space while drawing attention to neighboring businesses. Tucson used median space on a community college’s land, and Pueblo, CO, showed that all that is really needed is an alley. Signs themselves could be donated by local collectors or sign companies, saved from the wrecking ball, or

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<sup>480</sup> Such books already exist for roughly a dozen communities around the country. Portland has more than enough neon to justify a book and more than enough accomplished artists, photographers, and designers to make such a project a reality.

<sup>481</sup> IODC is resource-heavy but can be very effective, as it has been in Los Angeles and Pocatello. Leadership by a nonprofit could spark interest among City decisionmakers to assist with government funding.

purchased if necessary.<sup>482</sup> Signs should never be removed from their original location for the purpose of relocating them to a sign park unless there is absolutely no way to preserve them on site.

The review of neon sign parks around the country in Chapter 3 provides examples of the many strategies that could be undertaken in Portland:

- Temporary public art in a city park (Boston)
- Permanent park on donated land (Casa Grande, AZ)
- Indoor/outdoor park on private property (Saginaw, MI)
- Privately owned exterior wall (Edmonton)
- Spread around properties throughout town (Pomeroy, WA)
- Partnership with a community college (Tucson)
- Debut at a festival and move to a new development (Vancouver, BC)
- Part of an adaptive reuse project (Philadelphia)

As with other advocacy and outreach strategies, the possibilities for sign parks are limited only by the imagination of their creators.

Implementing components from these three strategic threads – regulations, incentives, and advocacy and outreach – can dramatically improve neon sign conservation outcomes. The city’s neon collection has fared relatively well compared to other cities, but signs continue to be lost on a regular basis and will continue to do so unless proactive action is taken by policymakers, nonprofits, and advocates to protect them. Portland should seriously examine the recommendations presented here before it is too late. This could begin with the formation of a sign preservation committee which should include representatives from the preservation, advocacy, and sign industry communities. This group can then explore the recommendations for what makes the most sense in Portland and formally propose future

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<sup>482</sup> Security Signs, for example, has a large collection of neon signs in its warehouse.

action. In the meantime, individual advocates and nonprofits need not wait for the cogs or city government to churn toward action. Efforts can and should begin right now to create a groundswell of support for sign preservation. When these efforts unify, Portland will be on its way to ensuring its world class collection of old neon signs is secure.

## CONCLUSION

*“You hear a lot of people...complaining, ‘Oh, the old [Portland] is dead’...Well, not while I’m alive it ain’t. ‘The old [Portland] is unavailable to us.’ That may be true, but I’m going to fight that all the way down...The new [Portland], whatever that is, is exactly as good as we make it, and it’s our duty to make it as good as we can.”*

*- Evan Voyles<sup>483</sup>*

Neon matters, and its preservation can be accomplished. Cities must balance countless priorities from equity to housing to public safety to quality of life. Likewise, nonprofits must balance public programs with advocacy, fundraising, and more, all on shoestring budgets with limited staff. Neon signs, however, need not compete with these other priorities and can in fact connect them and must be included in the mix. They are still “sights to dwell upon and never forget” more than 100 years after they first cast their haunting glow over city streets. Neon signs have ridden the roller coaster of popular opinion but have emerged on top, a credit to their importance as green, artistic, place-defining elements of cultural heritage that people are passionate about. These signs do not currently have the level of protection needed to ensure their continued survival, however. A growing number of cities and nonprofit advocates are tackling the situation head-on with creative regulations, incentives, and outreach programs that are saving neon signs nationwide. Portland has the power to do the same.

This paper began by developing a historic context for neon signage in America – from its initial ecstatic reception, to a period of discrimination, and finally a recent comeback – as well as in Portland, Oregon, before examining the state of neon in Portland through explorations of its location, makers, and representative sign profiles. It continued by articulating why neon signs matter and are worth saving, highlighting their value as placemaking elements that define places and activate the night, the passion and economic impact they inspire, their importance as cultural heritage and art, and their environmental benefits. It then analyzed current policy surrounding neon sign protection at the national and state levels. An examination of current local protections for neon – through regulations, incentives, and advocacy and outreach – found laudable accomplishments but many areas for improvement. Ideas for how this improvement could be implemented followed next through a national survey of best practices in neon

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<sup>483</sup> Plante, “Neon City.” Voyles was speaking specifically about Austin, TX, another city with a large collection of neon that has seen dramatic change in recent years with increased development. His comments have equal resonance in Portland.

sign preservation – from vintage sign ordinances to historic resource surveys to cost-share grants, IODC efforts, and more. The most successful programs were determined to combine elements of regulations, incentives, and advocacy and outreach in their approach. Finally, a set of recommendations was offered for how Portland could protect its vast and unique collection of extant neon signs.

This project has attempted to be as comprehensive as possible without claiming to be definitive. There are stories in the history of neon that were left out, innumerable unarticulated benefits neon offers, and many more places around the world doing valuable neon preservation work than could be included in this graduate terminal project. There are also many avenues for future research related to neon sign preservation. Some of these areas include:

- How can policies be crafted that specifically encourage the creation of *new* neon signs, as opposed to my focus on the preservation of existing signs?
- Is there a statistically significant correlation between neon signs and local ownership? Ownership by underserved populations?
- Does gender or race play a role in the conservation of neon signs?
- How have other countries addressed neon sign preservation? Could these approaches inform our work in the U.S.?
- How could Opportunity Zones help preserve neon signs?
- An unbiased scientific study into the environmental benefits of neon compared to LED.
- An economic impact study on the monetary value of neon signs to businesses.
- A complete survey of which neon signs have a layer of protection in Portland that expands on my brief summary.

The purpose of this project is to spur Portlanders to action. Policymakers, nonprofits, and individuals alike have the power to make a difference, but no single individual or organization can save Portland's neon alone. It takes unity and cooperation, a coming-together that marries regulation, incentives, and advocacy and outreach into a comprehensive whole. Rudi Stern boldly reminds us that

neon is the “light of the American dream.”<sup>484</sup> This dream still shines bright in Portland, and the city is fortunate to have such a large and important collection of extant signs.

Neon already embodies the city of Portland. The City has actively displayed an interest in preserving its neon heritage by experimenting with neon sign districts and by stepping in to take ownership of the city’s most iconic neon gem. This treasure, the White Stag sign, has shown its value in spades and become a true symbol of the city. Its bright neon lights standing vigil over the entrance to downtown from across the Willamette River literally welcome visitors and residents alike to this vibrant, cosmopolitan city. The time has come for the city to lean into this identity and ensure that the shining technology that so boldly welcomes all into the glow of the city is itself just as welcome here. It is time to proactively protect Portland neon.

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484 Stern, *The New Let There Be Neon*, 36.

*“One could argue the nature of signage for an eternity, but at the end of the day, we all want to see an animated dachshund wagging his tail while reclining in a hot dog bun.”*

*- Nathan Marsak<sup>485</sup>*



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<sup>485</sup> Los Angeles Neon, 10. Photo credit 1/2/13, Richard, Burbank, CA, [www.flickr.com/photos/richardmiller/8353661163](http://www.flickr.com/photos/richardmiller/8353661163).

## GLOSSARY

AHC – Architectural Heritage Center	OK66 – Oklahoma Route 66 Association
CDS – Community Design Standards	PAC – San Jose Preservation Action Council
CLG – Certified Local Government	PDC – Portland Development Commission
DIY – do it yourself	PIP – Prosperity Investment Program
DOZ – Design Overlay Zone	RLN – Relight the Night
HBA – Highway Beautification Act of 1965	Rt66 Grant – Route 66 Corridor Cost-Share Grant
HLS – Historic Landmark Sign	SCA – Society for Commercial Archeology
HRI – Historic Resource Inventory	SF – San Francisco
HRR – Historic Resource Review	SHPO – State Historic Preservation Office
IODC – inspiration-oriented DIY conservation	SIP – Storefront Improvement Program
LED – light emitting diode	SLC – Salt Lake City
LUMENS – Living Urban Museum of Electric Neon Signs	SOI – Secretary of the Interior
MONA – Museum of Neon Art	SOS – Scrap Old Signs
MPS – Multiple Property Submission	STS – Save the Signs
NHPA – National Historic Preservation Act of 1966	TFA – Tulsa Foundation for Architecture
NPS – National Park Service	THPF – Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation
NRHP – National Register of Historic Places	URA – urban renewal area
OEWD – San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development	URM – unreinforced masonry building
OHSD – Oregon Historic Sites Database	W9Y – The Whole 9 Yards
	WASP – War Against Scenic Pollution



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## ORIGINAL TABLES

**Table 1. Signs Individually Listed on the National Register**

Name	Year Listed	State	Standalone Listing?	Neon?	Ownership	Level of Significance (if explicit)	Criteria
Ash Mountain Entrance Sign	1977	CA	standalone	no	government	n/a	C (implied)
McCormick's Livery and Feed Stable Sign	1981	MO	standalone	no	commercial	n/a	C (implied)
Studebaker Clubhouse and Tree Sign	1984	IN	not standalone (includes contributing building)	no	commercial	national (implied)	A, C (implied)
East Entrance Sign	1987	UT	not standalone (part of MPS)	no	government	n/a	C
South Entrance Sign	1987	UT	not standalone (part of MPS)	no	government	n/a	C
Bristol Virginia--Tennessee Slogan Sign	1988	TN	standalone	no	government	local	A, consideration B
Shell Oil Company Spectacular Sign	1994	MA	not standalone (includes non-contributing building)	yes	commercial	local	A, C, consideration B
South San Francisco Hillside Sign	1996	CA	standalone	no	government	n/a	A
Bekins Storage Co. Roof Sign	1997	CA	not standalone (includes non-contributing building)	yes	commercial	local	A, C
Neon Signs Along Route 66 in NM MPD	2002	NM	standalone	yes	commercial	state	A, C
Canisteo Living Sign	2004	NY	standalone	no	government	local	A, C
McDonald's Store #433 Sign	2006	AR	standalone	no	commercial	state	C, consideration G
"Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" Sign	2009	NV	standalone	yes	government	local	A, C
Cat Creek Oil Field Sign	2015	MO	standalone	no	commercial	local	A
Grain Belt Beer Sign	2016	MN	standalone	yes	commercial	local	A
Walking Man Sign	2019	ME	standalone	yes	commercial	local	A, C

**Table 2. Sample of Portland's Old Neon Signs and Their Historic Resource Protections**








<b>Name</b>	<b>Photo</b>	<b>Protection</b>	<b>Listing</b>
<b>White Stag</b>		<i>building</i> : demo review, HRR <i>sign</i> : demo review, HRR	<i>building</i> : contributing to National Historic Landmark district, contributing to National Register district, HRI ranked <i>sign</i> : National Register district out-of-period, local historic landmark, HRI ranked
<b>Jake's Famous Crawfish</b>		demo review, HRR	<i>building</i> : National Register <i>sign</i> : noted as character defining feature
<b>Palms Motel</b>		<i>building</i> : none <i>sign</i> : 120-day demo delay	<i>building</i> : none <i>sign</i> : HRI ranked
<b>Portland Outdoor Store</b>		<i>building</i> : 120-day demo delay <i>sign</i> : none	<i>building</i> : HRI ranked <i>sign</i> : not mentioned
<b>The Alibi</b>		none	none
<b>Laurelhurst Theater</b>		none	none
<b>The Whole 9 Yards</b>		none	none

Table 3. Neon Sign Preservation Efforts Nationwide

Location	Tier*	Elements															Drawbacks
		Special District	Sign Inventory	Historic Resource Listing	Code Allowances	Allows Rehabilitation	Allows Reconstruction	Allows Relocation	Demolition Protection	Vintage Sign Ordinance	Financial Incentives	Outreach and Advocacy	Technical Assistance	IODC	Neon Tour Guide	Dedicated Neon Group	
Albuquerque	III	X	X		X						X						code allowances are relatively weak; signs outside district are unprotected
Miami Beach	III	X			X												code allowances are relatively weak; signs outside district are unprotected
Tucumcari	III								X	X	X						no direct incentives
Salt Lake City	II				X	X	X	X		X							limited to allowances
Nashville	III				X		X			X							limited to allowances
Miami	II	X			X	X	X	X		X							no known incentives or advocacy efforts
St. Petersburg	II		X		X	X	X	X	X	X							no known incentives or advocacy efforts
Burbank	III		X		X					X	X						code allowances are relatively weak
Route 66	II					X					X		X				limited to Route 66
NM Route 66 Assoc.	II		X	X		X					X	X					no MPS signs have been individually listed on the NRHP
NM Heritage Preservation Alliance	II	X			X						X	X					model sign code relies on DOZs, does not allow animation
Route 66 Assoc. of MO	II										X	X	X				limited to outreach and technical assistance
Los Angeles	I		X	X								X		X	X		limited to certain areas
Pocatello	II		X									X	X	X			IODC is expensive
Denver	II											X	X			X	limited to outreach and technical assistance
San Jose	II											X			X	X	limited to advocacy and outreach
San Francisco	I		X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	ordinance does not allow rehabilitation
Tucson	I		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	survey not made publicly available; listing process is complex
Tulsa	II	X	X		X						X	X			X		survey not made publicly available; efforts primarily limited to a single corridor; limited effect on old neon
Knoxville	II				X			X		X	X	X					allowances limited to relocation

\*Tier I: top tier program with multiple strategies worthy of emulation; Tier II: program with at least one strong strategy worthy of emulation; Tier III: program with small or limited elements worthy of emulation

Table 4. Issues With Current Local Preservation Practice					
Regulations				Incentives	Outreach
Historic Resource Protections	City Code Language	Design Guidelines	Planning Documents		
Portland's HRI is 36 years old and woefully out of date. Entire neighborhoods, especially those farther from the city center that represent population centers for traditionally underserved communities, are not represented in the existing survey. In addition, resources that have been built after the mid-1930s are also not well represented. This situation leaves a number of potentially significant neon signs unaccounted for. In addition, an understanding of the potential for neon signs to be historically significant was not common at the time, and thus even buildings that are ranked often do not mention signage in the documentation.	The six-month limit on how long a sign can be down for repair and still be put back up as the same sign is not always enough time to complete a proper conservation project. Such a limit is unnecessary.	Design Guidelines vary dramatically in their encouragement of the preservation of neon signs, leading to areas of the city where neon signs have lesser protection than others.	No inventory or historic context exists for neon signs (or historic signs in general) in Portland. Without such a document, it is difficult to effectively plan for or garner support for their protection. If decisionmakers do not know where the city’s neon signs are and why they’re important, they cannot plan for their protection.	Prosper Portland's PIP grant is only available in certain URAs. It is also the only local grant funding available to Portland neon signs. Thus, a large swath of the city, and its neon signs, have no local source of financial incentives to help with the high cost of sign preservation.	Portland's local preservation nonprofit, while engaged in meaningful work, has not made neon sign preservation a priority. As a result, much of the outreach surrounding neon signs is done by passionate but isolated individuals using blogs, social media, and crowdfunding.
The City traditionally has a high threshold for determining what constitutes demolition. This interpretation would likely not include removal of large character-defining signs connected with protected buildings. Thus, demolition review or delay that could protect signs connected with listed buildings may not kick in unless a complete demolition of the property is proposed.	Reconstruction of signs like-for-like should be allowed without making a sign “new.” If an existing sign is so far gone that it must be re-created from scratch using the same materials, this should be considered a restoration by code standards (or another allowable new classification) since it is a service to the city to re-create a historic sign rather than leaving an unsalvageable one to rot. Making reconstructions “new” signs encourages sign decay or incompatible new signs.	Design Guidelines are used as approval criteria, and can, when written to do so, be quite forceful. Even so, they do not explicitly compel particular actions (they are, after all, guidelines rather than requirements). Thus, even in areas where retention of existing neon signs is strongly encouraged, it is not required, and significant neon signs could still be inappropriately altered.	The Interstate Neon Sign District was too little too late and missed an opportunity to protect neon signs where they stand. The result has been a creative strategy that has not yet been successful at meeting its goal of relocating signs that could not remain in their original location. In addition, it did nothing to protect signs within the corridor that were not on the exclusive list of nine.	The PIP grant offers no incentive or encouragement for a business owner to choose preservation of an existing neon sign over its replacement with a new non-neon sign. The lack of such encouragement means the removal of a neon sign thanks to the grant is just as possible as a restoration.	There is no unified voice for neon preservation in Portland, and many of the city’s advocates are not connected to one another. In the same way a union harnesses the collective influence of a group, a unified advocacy group can turn an issue from one of scattered passion into a mobilized force to be taken seriously.
While CDS allows for property owners to save time and money by skipping HRR, there is no mechanism within the current system to protect signs, leaving signs in conservation landmarks/districts essentially without protection. The CDS makes sense for the historic landmark/district “lite” model of conservation landmarks/district that does not have as many protections, but it fails to offer any protection to signs in its current form.	The inability to change the wording on a sign and have it still be considered that same sign makes restorations of historic signs that have been altered more difficult. While it is natural that allowing new wording on an existing sign would constitute a new sign, the absence of a provision for restoring historic wording dis-incentivizes restoring historic signs that have lost integrity.	Even in Special/Plan Areas set aside to encourage neon signs, there is no actual benefit for doing so. Allowance and encouragement can only go so far. While these areas allow nonconforming signs that might not be allowed elsewhere and thus remove the question mark from the variance process for existing neon signs, they do little to incentivize their retention.			
Proposed changes to the HRR level for signs are a mixed bag. While speeding up the process, saving owners money, and providing some protection to otherwise unprotected signs in conservation districts, it also sets up a system where signs may not enjoy the same level of protection as buildings. All review types follow the same guidelines, but the review type assigned to signs involves the public less, provides no ability to stop demolition under any circumstance, and is handled by staff rather than a commission. While staff follow the same guidelines, there is still a danger of interpretation of the guidelines unfriendly to signs that is potentially lessened by the diversity of opinions inherent in the commission-decision process of other review types.	The inability to move signs to new locations and have them still count as the same sign, if they are endangered or if a business is forced out of its current location because of rising rents or other factors outside of their control, is a detriment to their preservation.				
Portland has not done a specific inventory of potentially significant signs. Those signs that do have a measure of protection get that protection from a hodgepodge of designations. Without a specific way to call out significant signs, the city does not have a good mechanism for understanding the significance of its neon sign stock and offering the appropriate historic resource protections to those signs.	The cost and time necessary to complete the land use review and variance process for existing nonconforming signs could be a financial barrier to a small business. A minimum of \$2700 just for the right to exist may incentivize some sign owners to just scrap their existing neon sign and replace it with a plastic conforming sign that even with the cost of the sign and permit could still be less than altering their existing neon to fit their business.	The Design Standards proposed to replace the CDS in DOZs do not encourage the preservation of neon signs. Additionally, because most preservation-related standards are not required and alteration projects would only need to consider optional standards for major remodels, many projects would not need to consider preservation at all. Even if a project did need to consider optional standards, there are countless ways to do so without considering preservation. The strongest preservation standard does not apply to small buildings and requires preserving only the majority of a façade. None of the standards apply if a building is under 50 years old. The result is very little incentive to protect neon signs, even indirectly.			

Table 5. Recommendations for How to Protect Neon in Portland

Regulations			Incentives					Advocacy and Outreach					
Vintage Sign Ordinance			Code Changes	Additional Regulatory Recommendations	PIP Grant Improvements	Additional City Recommendations	Nonprofit Recommendations	General Advocacy and Outreach Recommendations			Sign Park		
Structure	Bonuses	Protections						Dedicated Neon Group	Existing Preservation Nonprofit	Dedicated Neon Group or Existing Preservation Nonprofit			
Neon sign survey	Exemption from base sign code	Demolition and sale review or delay	Make existing nonconforming signs legal by right	Update the citywide Historic Resources Inventory to include signs and provide context	Expand the reach	Tap into CLG grants	Apply for grants	Harness the power of crowdfunding	Sponsor neon events	Coordinate efforts	Temporary public art in a city park		
Separate register for signs	Exemption from maximum sign area allotments	Listed signs cannot be removed from the list without review	Create more Special Sign Areas	Create a Conservation District of neon signs	Provide greater encouragement for neon sign conservation	Think creatively about funding	Operate a neon sign grant program based on popular vote	Expand neon sign tours	Add neon signs to Most Endangered lists	Target neon sign owners	Permanent park on donated land		
Moratorium on the removal of signs during the planning process	Allowances for rehabilitation	City seizure as a last resort	Strengthen the rules governing Special Sign Areas	Actively consider effects on historic neon signs during City-led Section 106 processes	Focus on legacy businesses	Create a neighborhood association sign grant	Partner with local corporations		Incorporate neon signs into an existing museum collection	Curate an art exhibit	Indoor/outdoor park on private property		
Methodology for how signs are listed	Allowances for restoration to an earlier look		Remove limits on how long signs can be down for repair		Do more outreach	Provide property tax benefits for conserving neon signs			Partner with the National Neon Sign Museum	Create a neon sign tour booklet	Privately-owned exterior wall		
Specific set of qualifying criteria	Allowances for reconstruction		Provide better allowances for sign reconstructions			Provide direct financial support for old signs						Produce a coffee table book	Spread around properties throughout town
Criterion of significance to a community	Allowances for relocation		Provide leniency in review of restored or relocated signs			Support business types that tend to have neon signs						Consider an IODC approach	Partnership with a community college
Reconsider traditional views on age requirements	Reduced administrative fees and processing time		Distinguish neon animation from other changing image signs			Provide grants to neon sign companies							Debut at a festival and move to a new development
Tiers, if necessary	Plaque		Designate neon signs as historic resources			Incentivize green power sources							Part of an adaptive reuse project
Required treatment plans, if listing relies on owner consent	Promotion		Specifically note in the sign code that signs can be character-defining features of buildings										
Decisions made by an informed commission as part of a public process			Create special classifications for special sign typologies										
Systems to continually add signs to the inventory			Amend the proposed Historic Resource Code changes to better protect neon signs										
			Encourage rehabilitation of existing signs in the Design Review and variance processes										
			Improve the Community Design Standards										
		Improve the proposed new Design Standards											
		Amend the proposed Portland Citywide Design Guidelines to better protect all neon signs											
		Consider alternate processes involving neighborhood associations											



## FIGURES



Figure 1. Sarasota, FL's vanished neon flamingo and its replacement. From *Signs, Streets, and Storefronts*





Figure 2. Portland International Airport art featuring iconic neon and other signs of Portland. *Photo by the author*



Figure 3. Local manufacturer Little Bay Root (<https://littlebayroot.com>) sells a shirt featuring the White Stag sign with the following pitch: “Your visit to Portland isn’t complete without a glimpse of this (officially) historic Oregon landmark. Didn’t get a good pic due to the pouring rain? No worries! Here it is on a super-comfy tee. The image is cleverly designed from the names of streets, cities, buildings, sports teams—basically all words that describe the state we hold so ‘deer.’”





Figure 4. The newly renovated Oregon Convention Center in Portland features a miniature LED White Stag sign as a hallway photo op. *Photo by the author*



Figure 5. The large blade sign on Portland's historic Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall was reconstructed in 1984 to match its original appearance. *Photo by the author*



Figure 6. The Academy Theater's neon and façade were reconstructed in 2006 to match their original appearance.  
*Photo by the author*





Figure 7. "A typical gaslit sign, as illustrated in an 1870s catalog of gaslight fixtures by Mitchell, Vance & Co. Illuminated signs became increasingly common during the gaslight era." From *New York Neon*. Original attribution: Mitchell, Vance & Co. Catalog, c. 1876, reproduced in *Picture Book of Authentic Mid-Victorian Gas Lighting Fixtures*, New York: Dover, 1984.



Figure 8. The first incandescent “spectacular” in New York, c1900. From *The New Let There Be Neon*



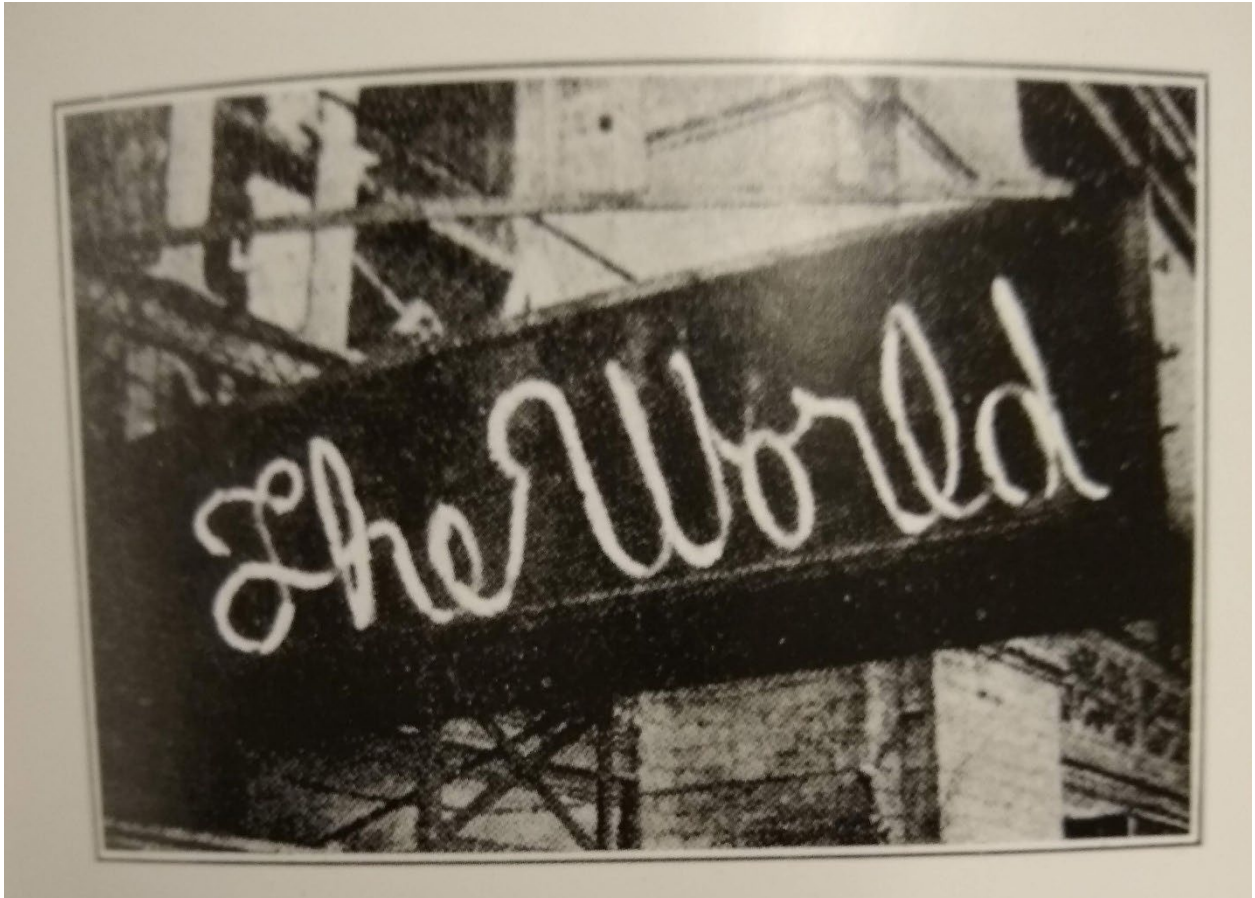


Figure 9. "A Moore tube sign in New York, c. 1904. The Moore tube lamp paved the way for the ascendance of neon illumination in subsequent decades." From *New York Neon*. Original attribution: Morris, *The Neon Tube Sign Business*, Houston: Mel Morris Neon Laboratories, 1929, collection of the John Crerar Library, University of Chicago.



Figure 10. Experiment in liquefying the gases of the air by Georges Claude, undated.

<https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/experiment-in-liquefying-the-gases-of-the-air-by-georges-news-photo/515185262>



Figure 11. The Earle C. Anthony Packard dealership in Los Angeles, was among the first neon sign in America when it was erected in 1923. It featured orange letters with a blue border. From *The New Let There Be Neon*





Figure 12. John Orlando Perry's 1840 painting, "A London Street Scene," satirizes the excesses of signage in the city decades before neon arrived on the scene. <http://www.johncoulthart.com/feuilleton/2011/11/26/a-london-street-scene>



Figure 13. The 1946 film *It's a Wonderful Life* used neon to represent that decay that would have befallen the idyllic town of Bedford Falls had protagonist George Bailey never been born.

<http://www.marketoracle.co.uk/Article18000.html>

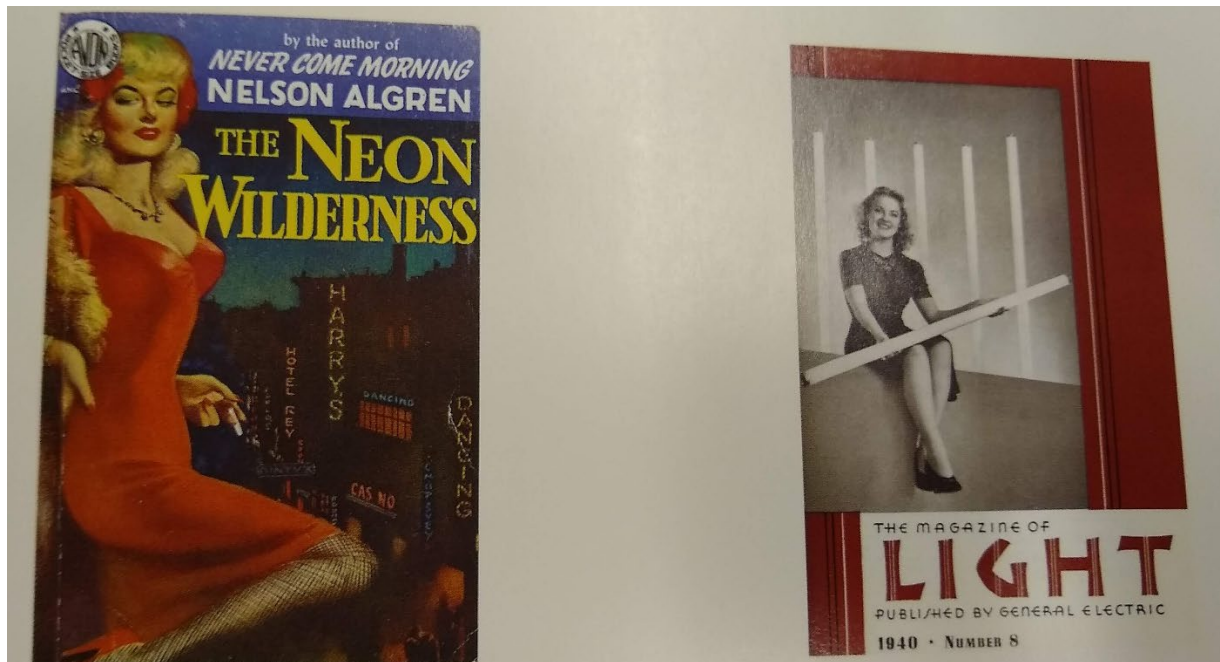


Figure 14. “As neon’s reputation suffered after World War II, signmakers found an untarnished alternative in fluorescent lamps, introduced by General Electric in 1938. Above: The cover to the 1949 edition of *The Neon Wilderness*, by Nelson Algren. Above right: Early GE promotional material for fluorescent lamps.” From *New York Neon*. Original attribution: (left) HarperCollins: Avon, 1947; (right) *The Magazine of Light*, 1940 No. 8. Collection of the Hall of Electrical History, The Schenectady Museum and Suits-Bueche Planetarium.





Figure 15. Edward Burtynsky's famous photo of Breezewood, PA, illustrates that the effect of sign regulations was often simply replacing one kind of "clutter" with another. *Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto*



- 1—MISS ELECTRIC SIGN gained widespread publicity for the S.O.S. program in the East as she posed from a boom crane perch.
- 2—IN SOUTH BEND, IND., prior to the actual removal operations, sign company personnel met with civic leaders. Left to right are: Noel Yarger, South Bend Neon Sign Co., Inc.; Jack Ernsberger, Adway Signs, Inc.; Bernard Bickel, city comptroller; John Dunnick, Sr., St. Joseph County Merchants' Association, and Morgan Peck, city sign inspector.
- 3—IN ST. LOUIS, MO., inspecting vehicle line-up are, left to right: Bill Matson, St. Louis Outdoor Adv., Inc.; Edward Schrader, Beautification commission; Phil Hammond, Kirn Signs, Inc.; Henrietta Baker, St. Louis Women's Ad Club, and John Ferring, Jr., Kirn Signs.
- 4—IN BOSTON, MASS., meeting in front of the governor's mansion are, left to right: Kenneth Sawyer, University Sign Co., Inc.; Gov. John A. Volpe; Robert Sawyer, Sign Week general chairman; Robert C. Weber, NESA president, and Charles Magliozzi, S.O.S. Day chairman.
- 5—IN SAN DIEGO, CALIF., Cy Cornell of San Diego QRS Neon addresses gathering of 250 assembled to salute the S.O.S. kick-off on the Community Concourse.
- 6—IN DENVER, COLO. two sign crews coordinate to eliminate Mammoth theatre sign, one of the larger displays removed in the week's activity.



(1)

## S.O.S. Day Was a Big Day Across the Country



(2)



(5)



(3)



(4)



(6)

120

NOVEMBER, 1966

Figure 16. A 1966 feature article in the *Signs of the Times* sign industry trade paper celebrates the success of the nationwide SOS program.





Figure 17. Dallas, Texas' Interfirst (now Bank of America) Plaza became first major façade illumination with neon done since the 1930s when it was constructed in 1985. It is still lit today. From *The New Let There Be Neon*



Figure 18. Pithy or poignant quotes such as this one from Denver's Urban Farmer are representative of the kind of interior text-based neon most prevalent today. <https://ourcommunitynow.com/lifestyle/neon-is-making-a-comeback-in-denver>





Figure 19. The Intersection of W Burnside and SW 3<sup>rd</sup> is shown with its grand illuminated arches before and after a road widening project as well as today. *City of Portland (OR) Archives; Rachel Ebersole*



Figure 20. Berkeley, California's "is it a Good Sign" brochure from the era advises that signs should be small, have no flashing elements, and be removed as soon as their parent businesses close. This brochure was a source for Portland planners of the time. *City of Portland (OR) Archives*



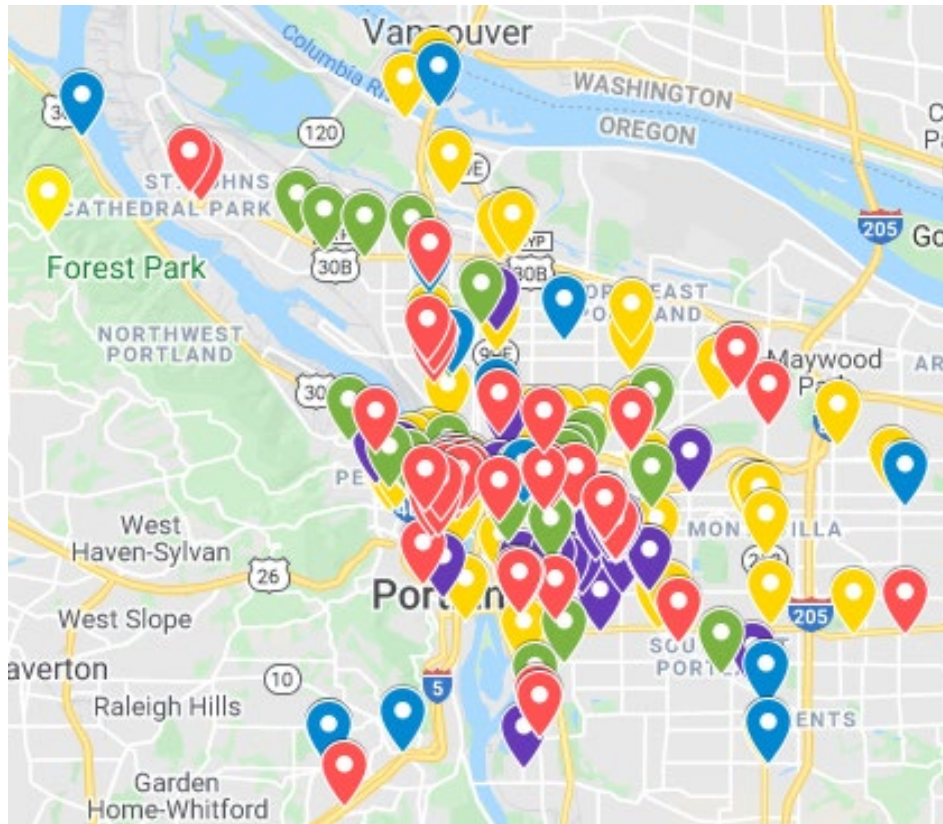


Figure 21. Neon Signs in Portland, OR. Searchable version and key available at <https://bit.ly/2WtYV6G>.

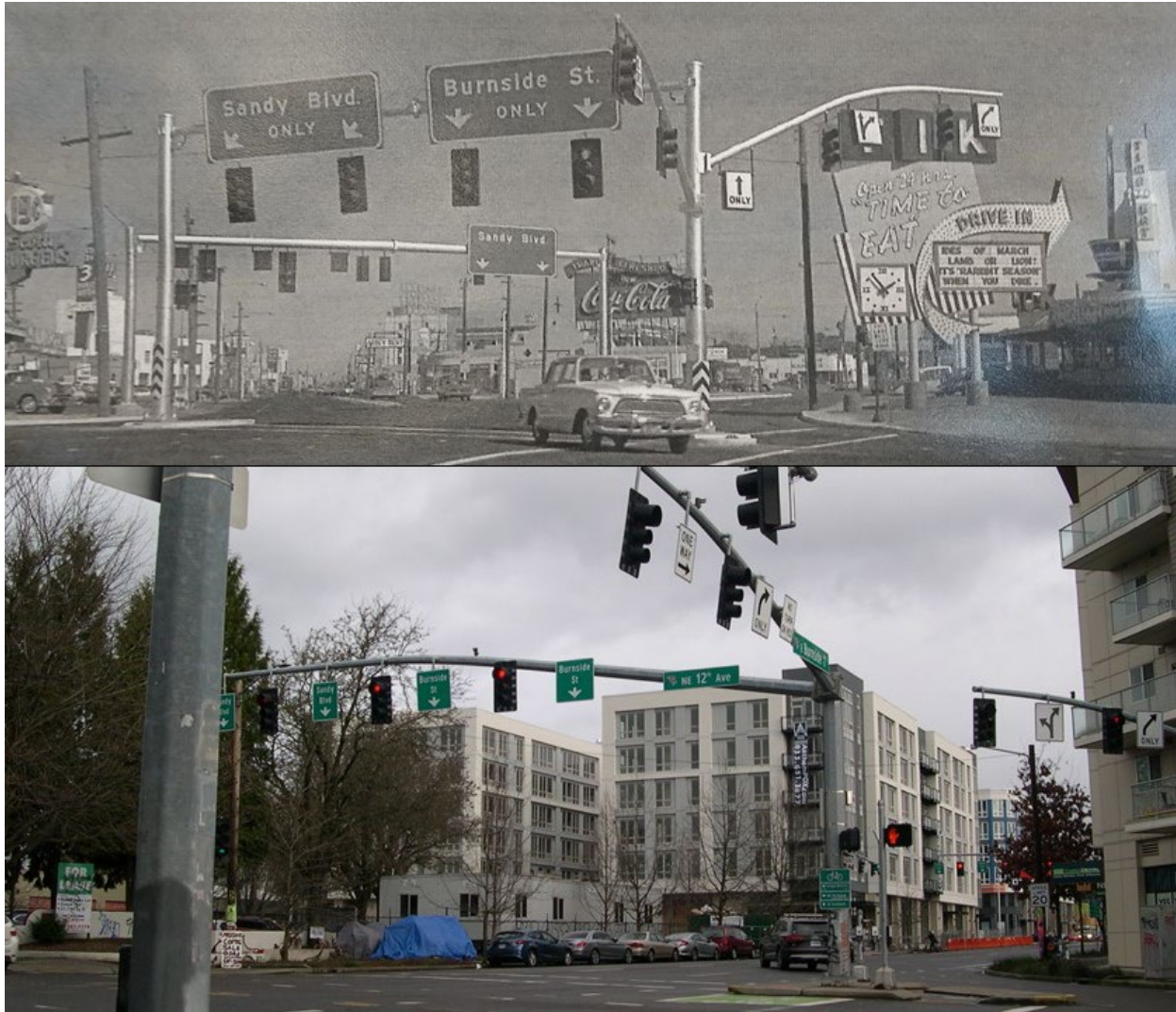


Figure 22. The major intersection at E Burnside and Sandy changed dramatically between 1965 and 2020. The entire block of Sandy at the left side of the photo was infilled, and all of the large freestanding neon signs have been replaced by mixed-use apartment buildings. *City of Portland (OR) Archives; Rachel Ebersole*





Figure 23. While the buildings are the same, none of the nine neon signs in this c.1940s photo of Sandy Boulevard looking east from 40<sup>th</sup> Street remain. *City of Portland (OR) Archives; Rachel Ebersole*



Figure 24. The loss of a single building can have a dramatic effect on neon signs, as evidenced by this 1952 photo at SW 6<sup>th</sup> and Washington compared with today. *City of Portland (OR) Archives; Rachel Ebersole*





Figure 25. Broadway was alive with theaters and neon in 1965. All these theater buildings and signs have since been lost except for the former Paramount Theater (Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall). *City of Portland (OR) Archives; Rachel Ebersole*



Figure 26. When this photo was taken in late 2012, the decades old Wentworth Chevytown sign was in its last days. Regulations related to the power lines in front of the sign prevented proper maintenance from being done, and the owners felt they were left with no choice but to remove it. *Rupert Ganzer, Flickr*





Figure 27. The Chin's Kitchen sign in Portland's Hollywood neighborhood was restored thanks to the city's only neon sign crowdfunding campaign, initiated by Neon Gods' Michael Mintz. *Photo by the author*



Figure 28. Security Signs creations through the years. Clockwise from top left: The first of three Security Signs warehouses; a 1947 shot of all neon signs in the workshop; the Lifetime Roofs sign structure still exists, but the neon is gone and the sign is now a billboard; the original Waddle's (not neon) sign has been tastefully rehabilitated to advertise the Hooters now in the building; while the large façade neon is no more, the rotating bread loaf still crowns the Franz Bread factory and was recently refurbished. *Security Signs archive*





Figure 29. Security continues to produce neon signs, though it is no longer their primary business, and tube bending is contracted out. Clockwise from top left: the current warehouse sign; Security has a number of old neon signs in their warehouse that have been rescued; the old neon workshop awaits enough neon business for the company to re-hire a tube bender; the old Waddle's sign in its current configuration; the Beaverton KingPins sign illustrates the neon accent style that makes up much of the company's current neon business; the University of Oregon's Portland campus buildings (historic and brand new) both feature neon signs (the majority of this paper was written in the building to the left, home of the Historic Preservation program). *All photos by the author except KingPins: Security Signs archive*





Figure 30. Portland's iconic White Stag sign through the years. Top row: 1947, *Vintage Roadside*, Etsy; 1986, *Daily Journal of Commerce*, Greg Paul <https://artslandia.com/then-now-portland-oregon-sign/>. Bottom row: Sometime between 1997-2009, [https://www.oregonlive.com/history/2015/12/white\\_stag\\_signss\\_red\\_nose\\_was.html](https://www.oregonlive.com/history/2015/12/white_stag_signss_red_nose_was.html); Post-2010, with red nose lit up for the holidays, <http://www.everything-portland.com/portlands-white-stag-sign-puts-on-his-red-nose-for-the-holiday-season/>

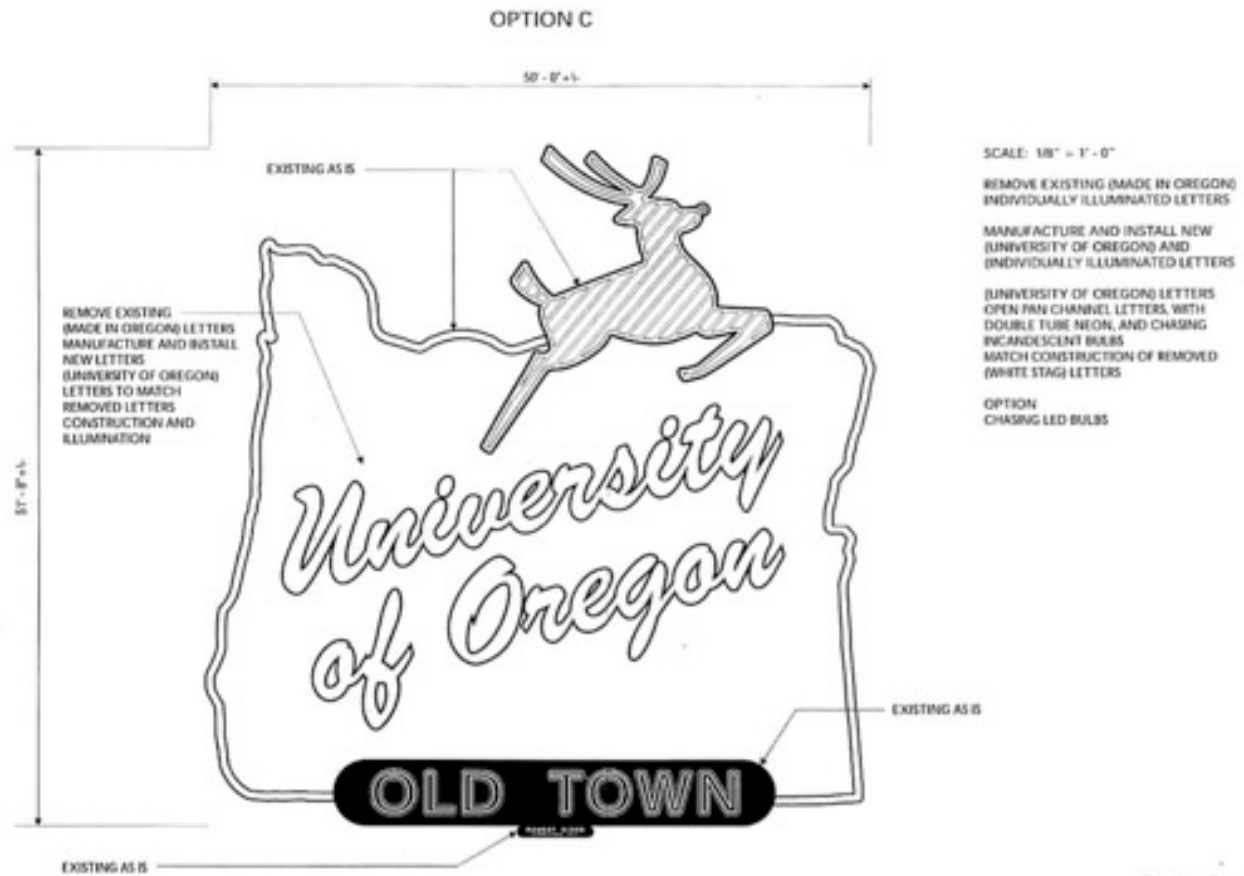


Figure 31. One of the controversial proposals from the late 2000s to alter the sign's wording from "Made in Oregon" to advertise the building's new tenant, the University of Oregon. Eventually the wording was changed to "Portland Oregon," as it remains today. <http://www.graphicology.com/blog/2009/10/9/272-the-made-in-oregon-soap-opera.html>



Figure 32. Portland Outdoor Store sign. *Photo by the author*



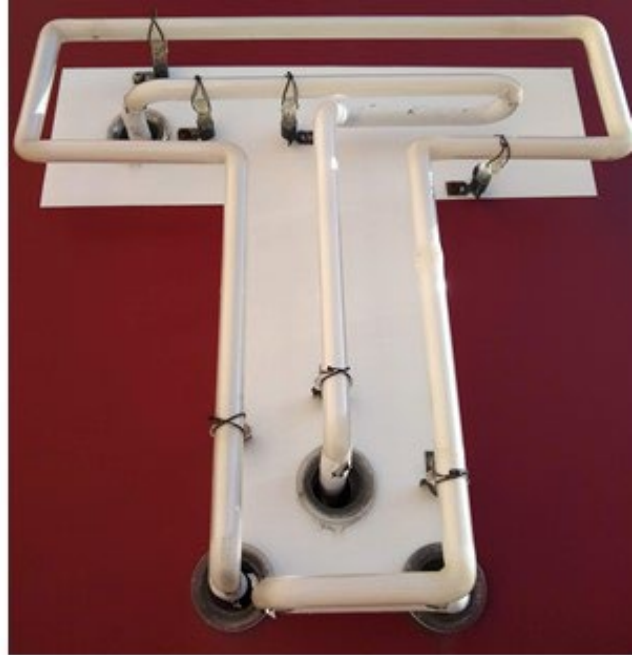


Figure 33. Clockwise from top left: the Laurelhurst Theater's elaborate neon display wraps around the entire upper façade, marquee, and blade sign; close up of neon tubing on the blade sign; the theater as it looked in 1981, showing how faithful the current reconstructed blade sign is; a close up of the façade neon. *All photos by the author except the historic photo: City of Portland (OR) Archives*

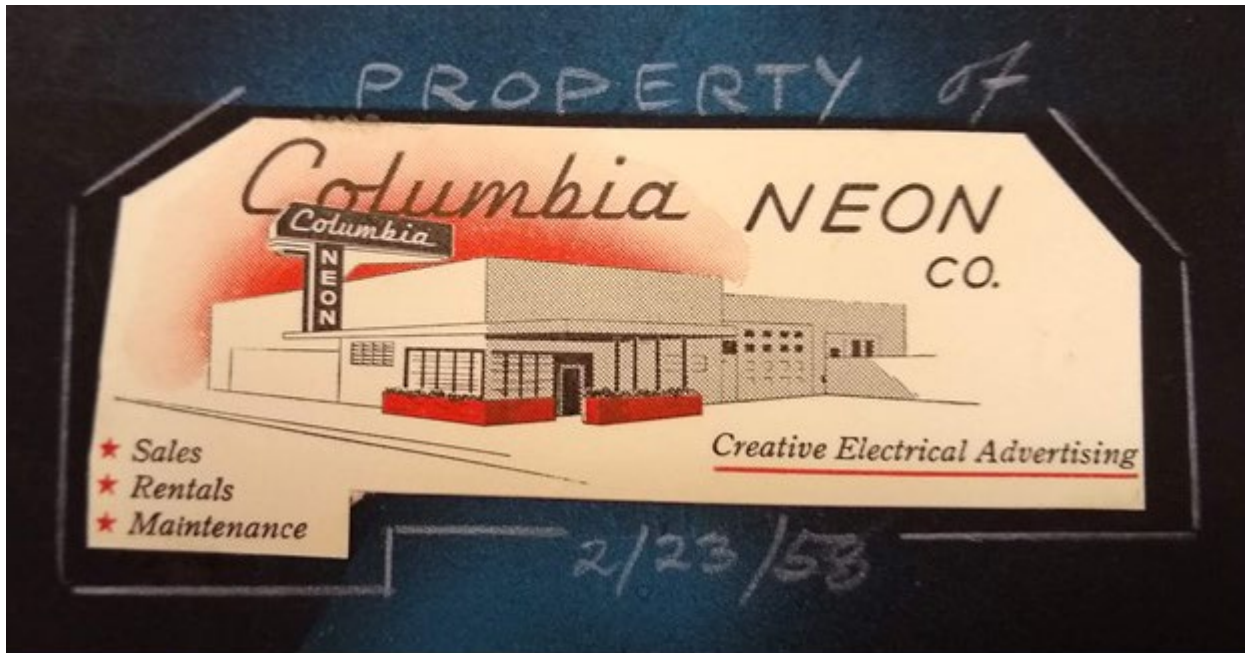


Figure 34. The owners of The Whole 9 Yards fabric shop honored their building's history as the Columbia Neon warehouse by preserving the old sign structure and creating their own neon logo. *Top: Oregon Historical Society; Bottom: <https://w9yards.com>*





Figure 35. The neon Redwood Empire sign in Grants Pass, OR, was saved when ODOT identified it as a significant resource during Section 106 compliance. *KTVL/John Stoeckl*



Figure 36. Casa Grande Neon Sign Park's dedication in 2019 drew hundreds of attendees. *Oscar Perez, Pinal Central*



Figure 37. Saginaw's Old Towne Sign Park. *MLive*





Figure 38. Neon signs at Vancouver, BC's Lumiere festival. *Dan Toulgoet, Vancouver Courier*



Figure 39. Edmonton, AB's outdoor neon sign museum. *Jeff Wallace*





Figure 40. Pueblo, CO's Neon Alley. Sue McMillin, *The Herald*



Figure 41. Boston, MA's "GLOW, Neon Signs in Massachusetts, 1925-70" exhibit on the Rose Kennedy Greenway. *Joann Vitali*





Figure 42. The idea that city lights promote safety is not unique to neon. "*The Powers of Evil Are Fleeing before the Light of Civilization.*" *Electrical Review and Western Electrician* 56 (May 21, 1910): 1053.

<https://medium.com/@dangerbui/lichtvisie-a-look-at-amsterdam-s-public-lighting-as-an-urban-sensing-platform-6265f506a5e2>

## Sign Museums and Displays

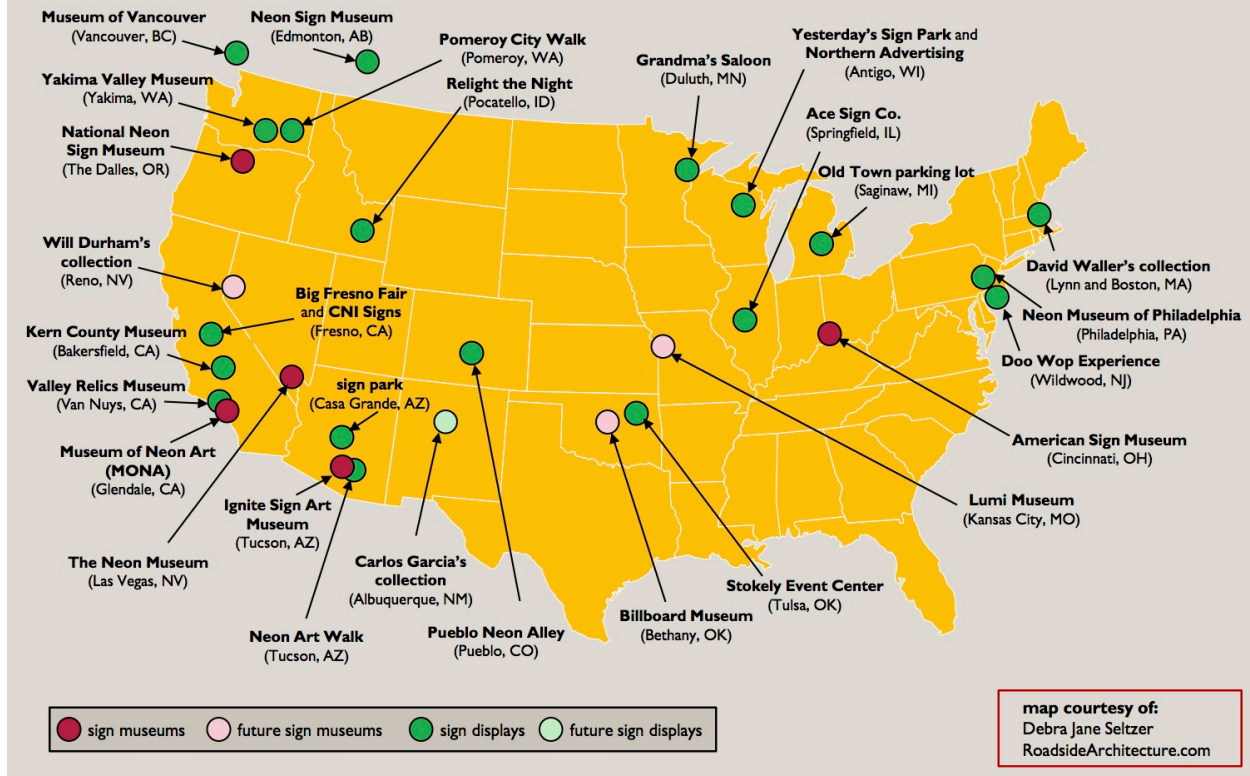


Figure 43. Debra Jane Seltzer's map shows the location of current and future sign museums and displays as of April 2018 and was part of a presentation given attendees of the Neon Speaks conference in San Francisco.





Figure 44. The nation's first neon museum, the Museum of Neon Art, is now located in downtown Glendale, CA, a suburb of Los Angeles. While most of its displays are indoors, some are visible through the window or outdoors.

*All photos by the author*

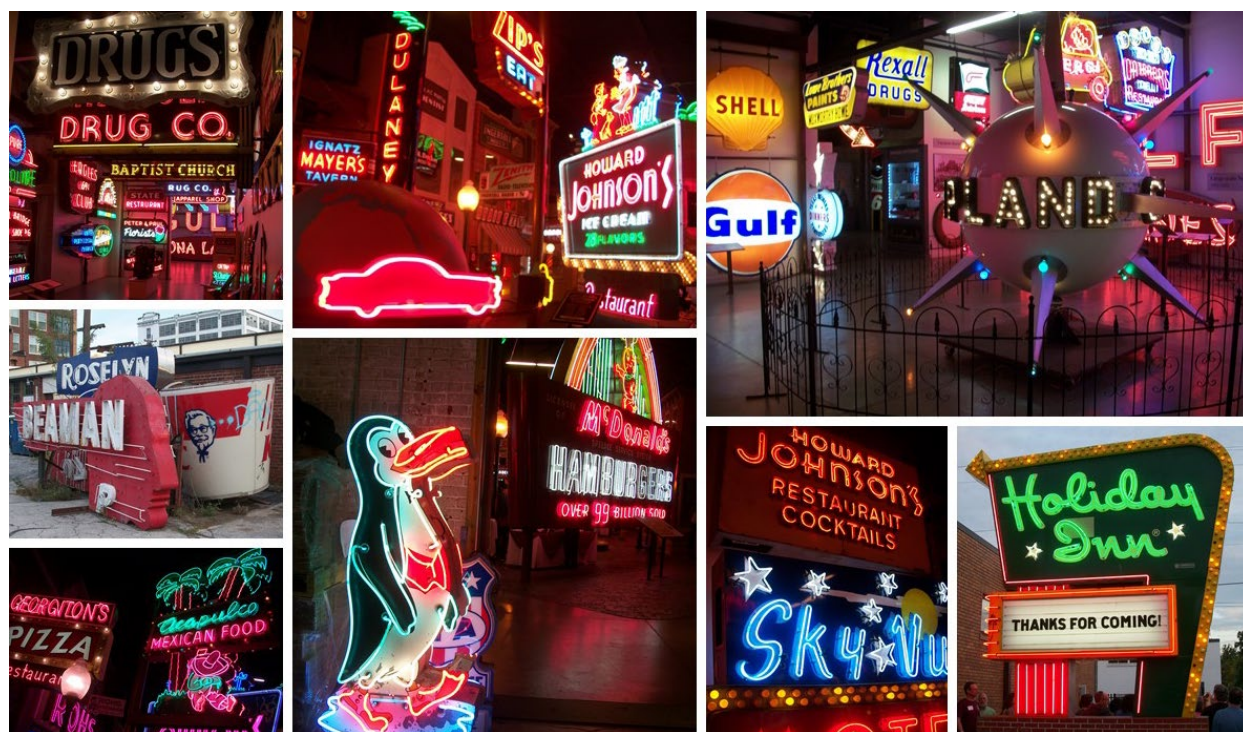


Figure 45. Cincinnati's American Sign Museum is the nation's largest. *All photos by the author*



Figure 46. The National Neon Sign Museum in The Dalles, OR, just opened in 2018. *All photos by the author*

	2018	2019
<b>LEDS</b>	<b>82%</b>	<b>85%</b>
<b>FLUORESCENT</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>16%</b>
<b>NEON</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>OTHER</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>RESPONDENTS</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>225</b>

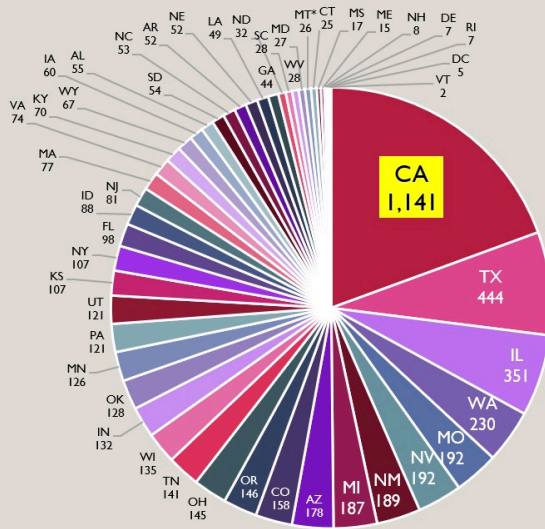
Figure 47. Illumination source used in electric signs sold. *Signs of the Times' 2019 State of the Industry Report*





Figure 48. The Valdivieso rooftop neon spectacular in Santiago, Chile is protected as a national monument. *Photo by the author*

## Where Are these Signs?



- **California** has more surviving vintage signs than any other state
- **Texas**, with a similar-sized land mass but with a smaller population, comes in 2<sup>nd</sup> with less than half the amount of signs as California
- **Illinois** has about 100 fewer signs than Texas
- **Washington, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, and Michigan** are about tied with about 200 vintage signs left



Figure 49. Debra Jane Seltzer's chart displays her record of the state by state breakdown of extant vintage signs as of April 2018 and was part of a presentation given the attendees of the Neon Speaks conference in San Francisco.



Figure 50. The seven (of nine) remaining signs identified for preservation in the North Interstate Corridor Preservation Plan. Some have been altered slightly over the years, but all remain in their original locations. *All photos by the author except The Alibi: Retro Roadmap*



Figure 51. The Oregon Leather Company sign in Old Town shown in a historic photo, prior to its restoration with a Prosper Portland grant, and after its refurbishment. *Left and center: Pam Johnson, Prosper Portland; Right: Curtis Gregory Perry, Flickr*





Figure 52. The Miller Paint sign before and after its restoration using a PIP grant. *Miller Paint*



Figure 53. The original Mozart Lounge Sign amidst a sea of vintage signs; its painted replacement which spurred the creation of Save the Signs; the restored neon sign made possible in part by Save the Signs. *Mozart's Denver website, Acme Neon Signs Facebook page, Mozart's Denver Facebook page*



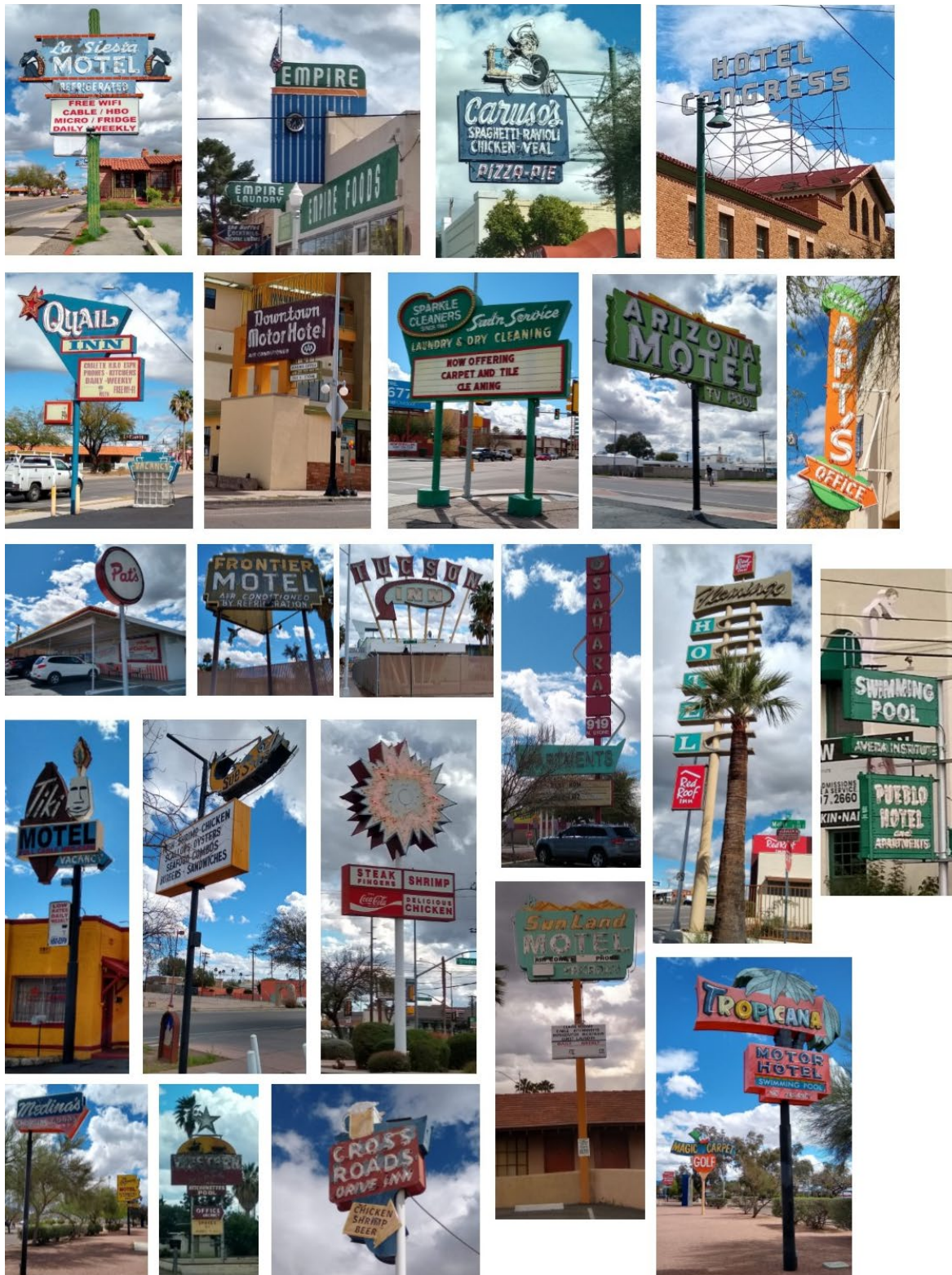


Figure 54. March 2020 photos of the majority of the signs featured in Tucson's 2012 *The Neon Pueblo* booklet. Included are the sign park (bottom left and right), Pueblo Hotel (center right, which initiated the city's involvement in neon sign preservation), and iconic Tucson Inn sign (center). *All photos by the author*





Figure 55. Tube bending demonstrations draw a crowd at Tucson's Ignite Sign Art Museum, which includes neon and plastic signs. One of these signs is the original Valencia Market neon sign featured in *The Neon Pueblo*, which has been replaced with a plastic copy. *All photos by the author*

## Support Your Local Heritage!

Partnering to Preserve Knoxville's Heritage



**SAVE OUR SIGNS**

KnoxHeritage.org • Facebook.com/JFG.Coffee

### You can help "Save Our Signs"

JFG Coffee has partnered with Knox Heritage, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization focused on preserving the unique heritage of East Tennessee.

For every package and cup of coffee sold in the Knoxville area through December 31, 2010, JFG Coffee will make a donation to Save Our Signs, a fund dedicated to preserving historic signs that are important to our region's heritage.\*

You are invited to follow the progress of Save Our Signs as well as the restoration of our own historic signs by visiting Facebook.com/JFG.Coffee.

**Help support the preservation of local heritage and buy JFG Coffee!**

\* Funds from S.O.S. are not used for the restoration of JFG historic signs.

## Fresh New Look Same Great Taste.



JFG Coffee now has a new look on the outside. And, on the inside, it is still the delicious coffee locals love.

Since JFG Coffee is roasted and packaged in East Tennessee, you know it's a fresh cup every time!

Take a close look at the new design on the package. Do you recognize the street? Go to Facebook.com/JFG.Coffee and let us know!



**KnoxHeritage.org**  
Facebook.com/JFG.Coffee



**Fresh New Look Same Great Taste.**

**\$1.00 off**  
ANY ONE (1)  
COFFEE



**JFG**

JFG Coffee • Knoxville, Tennessee Since 1919



Drink JFG to save historic signs.  
**Buy 5 cups of coffee, get the 6th FREE!**  
See back for details.

JFG Coffee has partnered with Knox Heritage, Inc., a 501(c)3 non-profit organization focused on preserving Knoxville's unique heritage. With every purchase of JFG Coffee through December 31, 2010, JFG will donate to Save Our Signs, a new fund dedicated to preserving and restoring Knoxville's historic signs.



Available at participating restaurants.  
Restaurant 1   Restaurant 1   Restaurant 1

Manufacturer's Coupon   Offer Expires 11/30/2010

**JFG**

**COFFEE**

Since 1919



0041410-012089

Figure 56. JFG Coffee has a strong presence in Knoxville, TN, including a prominent neon sign. Concurrent with their restoration of their own neon sign, the company ran this promotion in partnership with the local preservation nonprofit. A portion of all purchases of the company's product during a given timeframe were donated to the nonprofit to redistribute as neon sign restoration grants. *Knox Heritage*



**Table 3: Preservation Stages in Accordance to the Guidelines of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties**

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Stage 1: Preparation</b>	<b>Stage 2: General Process</b>	<b>Stage 3: Final Product</b>
<b>Preservation:</b> For historic neon electric displays that will receive conservation treatment that focuses on stabilizing deteriorated conditions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Preparation shall begin with identifying, retaining, and preserving as much of the historic materials and features as possible.</li> <li>-Loose materials shall be stored in a dry environment/container where it can be easily retrieved. Even when these materials will not be placed onto the final product, they shall be kept safe for future inquiry.</li> <li>-Thorough research and documentation of the historic significance of the sign shall be conducted.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Conservation treatment shall stabilize the deteriorated historic materials.</li> <li>-If the sign will continue in historic use, minimal repairs and limited in-kind replacement shall be done to allow the neon electric display to function.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Sign shall retain majority of its original materials in a stabilized condition.</li> <li>-For ultimate protection, sign should be kept indoors. If sign is kept outdoors, sign should be positioned to detract from water infiltration and water collection that will further rust the metal cabinet.</li> </ul>
<b>Rehabilitation:</b> For historic neon electric displays that will receive conservation and/or restoration treatment geared at continuing its historic use, including the use of appropriate alterations/additions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Preparation shall begin with identifying, retaining, and preserving as much of the historic materials and features as possible.</li> <li>-Loose materials shall be stored in a dry environment/container where it can be easily retrieved. Even when these materials will not be placed onto the final product, they shall be kept safe for future inquiry.</li> <li>-Thorough research and documentation of the historic significance of the sign shall be conducted. If the display shall be altered/added, the historic sign’s significant features shall be identified for new design to consider.</li> <li>-Historic materials shall be inspected to distinguish whether they can be salvaged. If replacement must be carried through, preliminary research shall find suitable replacement materials.</li> <li>-If the sign shall be altered/added onto, various design schemes shall be presented to identify schemes that are the most appropriate.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Conservation treatment shall salvage as much historic materials as possible.</li> <li>-Repairs shall be done to retain the historic material.</li> <li>-Replace deteriorated and/or non-surviving features.</li> <li>-Alterations/Additions shall be made to be irreversible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Sign shall retain majority of its historic materials and features.</li> <li>-Adaptive reuse of sign allows for a new design in the replacement of missing historic features.</li> <li>-Sign shall be erected, and if possible, installed in a manner that matches the historic appearance.</li> </ul>

**Table 3: Preservation Stages in Accordance to the Guidelines of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties**

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Stage 1: Preparation</b>	<b>Stage 2: General Process</b>	<b>Stage 3: Final Product</b>
<p><b>Restoration:</b> For historic neon electric displays that will be fully restored to match its historic appearance of a given significant period.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Preparation shall begin with identifying, retaining, and preserving as much of the historic materials and features as possible.</li> <li>-Loose materials shall be stored in a dry environment/container where it can be easily retrieved. Even when these materials will not be placed onto the final product, they shall be kept safe for future inquiry.</li> <li>-Thorough research and documentation of the historic significance of the sign shall be conducted to determine a significant period and its historic appearance during that period for the sign be restored to.</li> <li>-Existing sign elements will be examined to determine whether it will be restored; and missing elements will be deliberated to determine whether those will be reconstructed.</li> <li>-Historic materials shall be inspected to distinguish whether they can be salvaged.</li> <li>-If replacement must be carried through, preliminary research shall find suitable replacement materials.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Conservation treatment shall salvage as much historic materials as possible.</li> <li>-Repairs shall be done to retain the historic material.</li> <li>-Replace deteriorated and/or non-surviving features.</li> <li>-Reconstruct missing features from the restoration period.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Restored sign should accurately portray historic appearance of the given significant period.</li> <li>-Sign shall retain as much of its historic materials and features as possible.</li> <li>-Sign shall be restored to include all elements of the sign, including readerboards.</li> <li>-Sign should be made operable for working condition.</li> <li>-Sign shall be erected, and if possible, installed in a manner that matches the historic appearance.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Reconstruction:</b> For historic neon electric displays that no longer exist; of extreme importance and none or few exist like it; or in a high-level of deterioration that restoration is not an option and continuation of its historic use or its use as a historic object installation is still desired.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Preparation shall begin with identifying, retaining, and preserving as much of the historic materials and features as possible.</li> <li>-Loose materials shall be stored in a dry environment/container where it can be easily retrieved. Even when these materials will not be placed onto the final product, they shall be kept safe for future inquiry.</li> <li>-Thorough research and documentation of the historic significance of the sign shall be conducted in order to reconstruct the sign with little conjecture.</li> <li>-Historic materials shall be inspected to distinguish whether they can be salvaged.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Conservation treatment shall salvage as much historic materials as possible.</li> <li>-Reconstruct heavily deteriorated and/or non-surviving features using in-kind or more durable materials.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Reconstructed sign should accurately portray the historic appearance of the given significant period.</li> <li>-Craftsmanship, care, and materials utilized should be of superb quality to have lasting longevity.</li> <li>-The sign should be in working condition.</li> <li>-Sign shall be erected, and if possible, installed in a manner that matches the historic appearance.</li> </ul>

**Table 4: Conservation Treatments in Accordance to the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties**

Approach	Conservation Treatment
<p><b>Preservation:</b> For historic neon electric displays that will receive conservation treatment that focuses on stabilizing deteriorated conditions.</p>	<p>Work includes, but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Surface cleaning to remove dirt and debris.</li> <li>-Remove and salvage broken glass components that are about to fall off.</li> <li>-Consolidate peeling paint and if the sign is to be placed outdoors, apply an appropriate product to stabilize paint from further peeling.</li> <li>-Apply a corrosion inhibitor on rusted areas to stabilize metal from further corroding.</li> <li>-Ensure all openings on cabinet substrate are covered.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Rehabilitation:</b> For historic neon electric displays that will receive conservation and/or restoration treatment geared at continuing its historic use, including the use of appropriate alterations/additions.</p>	<p>Work includes, but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Surface cleaning to remove dirt and debris.</li> <li>-Remove and salvage broken glass components.</li> <li>-Retain as much historic illuminated tubes/bulbs as possible. If applicable, replace and splice new tubing into historic tubing.</li> <li>-Replacement materials should match historic materials in lighting, glass-type, size, color, design, composition, and texture.</li> <li>-Retain as much historic housings and stand-offs as possible. Replacement housings and stand-offs should match historic in material, size, color, design, composition, and texture. If housings and/or stand-offs can not be found to match historic type, then unobtrusive types can be used that will not detract from the cabinet design.</li> <li>-Replace electrical conduit including transformers to meet contemporary electrical regulations. If historic sign had animation, measures should be made to restore animation that matches historic effect. If city regulations disallow the use of animated signs, sign should also include the ability to keep a stagnant appearance.</li> <li>-If sign consists of a porcelain enamel cabinet, treat cracked/nicked areas through appropriate measures such as the application of a corrosion inhibitor and/or epoxy to protect metal from corroding.</li> <li>-If cabinet was painted and a new layer of paint is desired, apply an isolation layer and in-paint or over-paint with a reversible paint, such as enamel. New paint should match historic color, design, composition, and texture. If sign will be adaptively re-used, new design shall be mindful of the historic appearance and keep to the same style in color combination, lettering, shadowing, details, etc. Complete paint stripping should be discouraged.</li> <li>-Replace deteriorated and broken plastic or plexiglas components using similar materials that match historic in type, size, color, design, composition, and texture.</li> <li>-Retain and refurbish as much metal components as possible, including, but not limited to, metal used for hardware, cabinet, channel lettering, and any other decorative features.</li> <li>-Apply a corrosion inhibitor on rusted areas to stabilize metal from further corroding and/or remove rust through appropriate measures.</li> <li>-Replace heavily rusted metal components with in-kind metal.</li> </ul>

Table 4: Conservation Treatments in Accordance to the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties

Approach	Conservation Treatment
<b>Restoration:</b> For historic neon electric displays that will be fully restored to match its historic appearance of a given significant period.	<p>Work includes, but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Surface cleaning to remove dirt and debris.</li><li>-Remove and salvage broken glass components.</li><li>-Retain as much historic illuminated tubes/bulbs as possible. If applicable, replace and splice new tubing into historic tubing.</li></ul> <p>Replacement materials should match historic in lighting, glass, size, color, design, composition, and texture.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Retain as much historic housings and stand-offs as possible. Replacement housings and stand-offs should match historic in material, size, color, design, composition, and texture. If housings and/or stand-offs can not be found to match historic type, then unobtrusive types can be used that will not detract from the cabinet design.</li><li>-Replace electrical conduit, including transformers to meet contemporary electrical regulations. If historic sign had animation, measures should be made to restore animation that matches historic effect. If city regulations disallow the use of animated signs, sign should also include the ability to keep a stagnant appearance.</li><li>-If sign consists of a porcelain enamel cabinet, treat cracked/nicked areas through appropriate measures such as the application of a corrosion inhibitor and/or epoxy to protect metal from corroding.</li><li>-If cabinet was painted and a new layer of paint is desired, apply an isolation layer and inpaint or overpaint with a reversible paint, such as enamel. New paint should match historic color, design, composition, and texture. Complete paint stripping should be discouraged. Alterations of the sign's historic color, design, composition, and texture will not be permitted.</li><li>-Replace deteriorated and broken plastic or plexiglas components using similar materials that match historic in type, size, color, design, composition, and texture.</li><li>-Retain and refurbish as much metal components as possible, including, but not limited to, metal used for hardware, cabinet, channel lettering, and any other decorative features.</li><li>-Apply a corrosion inhibitor on rusted areas to stabilize metal from further corroding and/or remove rust through appropriate measures.</li><li>-Replace heavily rusted metal components with in-kind metal.</li><li>-Missing elements that were once part of the historic sign during the restoration period shall be reconstructed to match its historic appearance in size, color, design, composition, and texture. NOTE: Substantial amount of physical and documentary evidence is necessary for an accurate reconstruction that is based on minimal conjecture.</li></ul>

Table 4: Conservation Treatments in Accordance to the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties

Approach	Conservation Treatment
<b>Reconstruction:</b> For historic neon electric displays that no longer exist, of extreme importance and none or few exist like it, or in a high-level of deterioration that restoration is not an option, and continuation of its historic use or its use as a historic object installation is still desired.	<p>NOTE: Comprehensive documentary and physical evidence must be provided to permit an accurate reconstruction of historic sign that is based on minimal conjecture.</p> <p>Work includes, but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Reconstruct historic sign to match in materials, size, color, design, composition, texture, lighting, and when applicable, animation effect.</li><li>-Utilize materials and technology that promote the sign's longevity, such as corrosion-resistant metals and electric transformer.</li><li>-Reconstruction shall be clearly identified as a contemporary recreation.</li><li>-Reconstruction shall accurately represent original design and should not introduce new elements.</li></ul>

## APPENDIX B

### A PRESERVATION METHODOLOGY FOR NEON ELECTRIC DISPLAYS

**Table 9: Standards for the Treatment of Neon Electric Displays**

<p><b>I. Standards for Maintenance.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. A historic neon sign and all of its components shall be continually maintained to promote the sign's longevity.</li><li>2. The maintenance shall regulate the sign's appearance in daytime and nighttime hours.</li><li>3. The historic sign shall be periodically cleaned with water to remove grime and soiling, and deter bird nesting.</li><li>4. The historic sign shall be regularly repainted with suitable paint for all-weathered conditions.</li><li>5. The historic sign shall have all illuminated elements in working condition; especially when non-working letters can lead to unattractive gaps.</li><li>6. The historic sign shall be periodically examined of sign support elements, including cabinet hardware, structural support, and stand-offs.</li></ol>
<p><b>II. Standards for Alterations</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. The original design layout of the historic sign shall be retained.</li><li>2. All alterations shall follow the same standards for maintenance.</li><li>3. Appropriate alterations are dependent on the significance of the sign. The following will describe measures that avoid a lessening of historic integrity in accordance to its significance-type.<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Historic Significance<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>i. If the historic sign is associated with a significant business, all measures shall retain the name, symbol, and/or representation of this business.</li><li>ii. If the historic sign is associated with being a historic artifact, the sign shall not be altered.</li><li>iii. If the historic sign is associated with a significant period, all measures shall retain the design character of the historic period.</li></ol></li><li>b. Aesthetic Significance<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>i. If the historic sign is outstanding in overall design, all measures shall retain all sign elements.</li><li>ii. If the historic sign is outstanding in lighting technique, all measures shall retain historic lighting elements, colors, and design.</li><li>iii. If the historic sign is outstanding in painting design, all measures shall retain historic colors, and design.</li></ol></li></ol></li></ol>

iv. If the historic sign is outstanding in animation, all measures shall retain animated qualities in flasher-type and lighting design.

c. Cultural Significance

i. The historic sign shall retain the cultural character of which makes it significant. This may be through the continuation of size, shape, materials, colors, and/or illustration.

**4. Alteration in Advertisement.**

a. When dealing with a change in business services where the business no longer serves what is originally advertised on the historic sign (e.g. “pool”, “sandwiches”, etc.), the sign owner may modify the respective lettering and/or illustration with a design that is compatible with the historic appearance.

b. The remaining features of the historic sign shall be kept including the historic color, cabinet shape and structure, and lighting.

**5. Alteration in Name.**

a. If the business name is only a secondary element of the historic sign, the sign owner is able to modify the respective lettering and/or illustration with a design that matches the historic appearance.

b. If the business name is a primary element of the historic sign (e.g. a skeleton sign composed of only cabinet letters), then the sign owner shall not change lettering. To do so will compromise the integrity of the historic sign.

i. Other methods of sign display shall be explored to meet the needs of all parties involved. This includes the adoption of the historic name, the addition of an appropriate secondary sign, and as a last resort, its relocation at a similar appropriate location.

**III. Standards for Relocation**

1. If the original business cannot get a reasonable rate of return for the continued use of the historic sign, an economic hardship may be determined, pending an evaluation by the respective preservation committee. In these dire situations, a sign shall be relocated to another location.

**2. Relocation at a Similar Location**

a. The new location shall match in business-type and urban context (urban, suburban, rural, etc.) in the best possible means.

b. The historic sign shall be placed in a similar manner as its historic appearance in

its height from the ground, relationship to the building, and visual perspective.

- c. The historic sign shall be in working use, following the same standards for maintenance and alterations.

**3. Relocated as a Form of Public History/Art Installation.**

- a. The historic sign shall be installed with appropriate plaque-signage that identifies its original location, fabrication date, removal date, and significance statement.
- b. The historic sign shall not be altered in its historic appearance.
- c. The historic sign shall follow the same standards for maintenance.

**4. Relocated in a Museum Environment.**

- a. The museum establishment shall comprehensively document the historic sign in its physical appearance upon entrance of the museum.
- b. The museum establishment shall regularly conduct condition assessments on the historic sign.
- c. The museum establishment shall actively promote the significance of the historic sign in its research, interpretation, and display.
- d. The historic sign shall not be altered in its historic appearance.
- e. The historic sign shall be maintained to promote its longevity. Restoration and working illumination is encouraged but not required.

**IV. Standards for Removal**

- 1. If all of the above methods for a historic sign's relocation are inaccessible, then a historic sign shall be comprehensively documented. The documentation, written and pictorial, shall be placed in an archival repository available for public view.
- 2. The historic sign shall be dismantled and removed using appropriate sustainable methods such as the recycling of parts.



## Community Design Guidelines

### Appendix M: Special Signs Along North Interstate Avenue



◀ **Alibi**  
4024 N.  
Interstate Ave.



◀ **Viking Motel**  
6701 N. Interstate  
Ave.

▶ **Crown Motel**  
5226 N. Interstate Ave.

(removed in Spring  
2008, currently in  
storage)



▶ **Westerner Motel**  
4333 N. Interstate Ave.



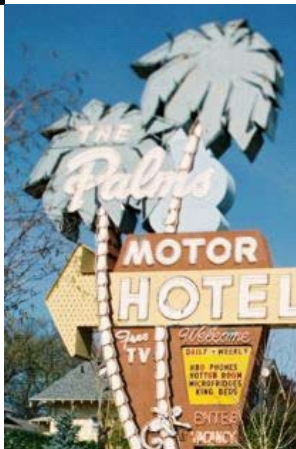
◀ **Interstate Lanes**  
6049 N. Interstate Ave.



◀ **Nite Hawk**  
6423 N. Interstate  
Ave.



▶ **Palms Motel**  
3801 N. Interstate Ave.



◀ **Super Value Motel**  
5205 N. Interstate Ave.



◀ **Budget Motel**  
4739 N. Interstate  
Ave.





# Prosperity Investment Program (PIP) Grant Overview

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Thank you for your interest in the Prosperity Investment Program (PIP) Grant. The information in this overview document is provided to assist you in understanding more about the grant program.

## ***Who or What Projects Do We Fund?***

**Purpose:** The Prosperity Investment Program provides tax increment finance (TIF) resources in line with local community action plans and PDC's 2015-2020 Strategic Plan to make small-scale real property improvements and to deliver business and development-focused technical assistance.

Program investments are awarded using social equity goals and managed to maximize public benefit. **Investments are targeted to deliver outcomes unlikely to occur without the resources.**

PIP Grants are awarded to support business competitiveness and/or property redevelopment in projects that meet at least one of the following public goals:

- i) Secure access to high quality employment for Portlanders,
- ii) Foster wealth creation for people of color and within low-income neighborhoods,
- iii) Build healthy communities in line with local community action plans.

## ***How Much is Available and What Work is Eligible?***

**Availability of Funds:** The Program provides 50 percent matching funds for approved project hard and soft costs. Total grant may not exceed \$50,000.

Funds are subject to budget availability. The Program may be targeted to specific geographic areas or priority populations as needed to meet the PDC 2015-2020 Strategic Plan and community action plans. Some program incentives may not be available in all areas or for all eligible applicants.

In order to provide benefits to the widest range of eligible recipients, a grant recipient or property may only receive one PIP grant within a 10-year period.

**Eligible Work:** The grant may be used for both physical improvement (*hard costs*) and eligible consulting assistance (*soft costs*) to support for-profit related business and property related improvements associated with commercial, industrial, mixed-use, and market rate housing projects.

*Hard Costs* - Signage, lighting, storefront, or mechanical systems, tenant improvements, roofs, sidewalks, parking lots, landscaping, or other permanent fixtures.

*Soft Costs* - Project development services such as architectural, engineering, legal, environmental, market or financial, and business technical assistance such as manufacturing efficiency, business plan development, marketing, accounting, and legal. Grant funds for soft costs may not exceed \$25,000. Prosper Portland, at its sole discretion, may require use of a professional consultant for certain projects and where such advice is likely to improve the project or business competitiveness.

**Ineligible Work:** The following uses are not eligible to receive Grant funding given state legislative funding restrictions and Grant purpose:

- Non-permanent fixtures, personal property and equipment, government uses within publicly owned buildings
- National franchises
- Locally owned franchises with more than three locations
- Non-profit organizations (unless for-profit business tenant)
- Businesses that exclude minors during all business hours
- Work completed prior to a grant agreement being executed

In limited cases grants may be sanctioned for one of these uses with Director approval.

## ***Approval and Grant Administration***

**Approvals:** Prosper Portland has the sole authority to determine eligibility of proposed work and confirmation of completed work. Certain work may be required or precluded as a condition of funding. Participants will be responsible for obtaining necessary regulatory approvals, including those of the City Design and Landmark Commissions where applicable, the State Historic Preservation Office, the City of Portland building permits and any other necessary permits. All work must comply with city, state and federal regulations.

**Bidding:** Grantee shall utilize Minority or Women Owned firms to perform 20% or more of the project work by cost. The Grantee may only be released in whole or in part from this requirement by demonstrating that: 1) There is no minority or women owned firm available to complete the project tasks or sub-task or 2) The bids are significantly more costly than non-minority or women owned firms.

If the applicant is a licensed contractor, an additional bid must be submitted to validate the applicant's bid. Contractor fees and overhead for applicant owners will not be reimbursed. All contractors must be licensed by the State of Oregon. All construction contracts will be between the applicant and contractor. Prosper Portland reserves the right to reject the Grantee's proposed contractor(s).

**Commitment of Funds:** Grant funds will only be disbursed for work completed after a Grant Agreement is executed. Prosper Portland will review and approve proposed work and ensure all other conditions are met prior to issuing a Grant Agreement and allocating funds to the project. The Grant Agreement will outline additional terms and conditions of the matching grant and will serve as the legal commitment of both parties as to the scope and quality of work and the amount of funds committed.

**Reimbursement of Funds:** Prior to reimbursement of funds, all completed work will be reviewed by Prosper Portland staff as to compliance with the Grant Agreement. At Prosper Portland discretion, the

contractors or consultants may be paid directly if reimbursement is deemed a financial hardship for grant recipient.

**General Conditions:** The following general conditions will apply to all projects:

- Improvements funded by the grant will be maintained in good order; graffiti and vandalism will be dutifully repaired.
- Property taxes must be current, and participants may have no debts in arrears to the City when the Grant Agreement is issued.
- Compliance with the City of Portland Business License, and registration with State of Oregon, is required.
- The Applicant must complete, sign, and submit a W-9 for disbursement of funds.
- All projects will display signage indicating Prosper Portland's involvement in the improvement work during construction.
- Grantees will be required to retain records for potential Prosper Portland audit.
- Grantees will be required to repay grant funds if the terms of a grant agreement are materially breached.

### ***Special Requirements:***

#### **High Quality Employment and Workforce Diversity**

In addition to the standard grant requirements described above, grants awarded to a traded sector, target industry firm, or high-growth firm (defined above) are contingent on two additional factors: 1) paying a living wage, 2) diversification of workforce. Following approval of such grant applications, firms will be required to:

- 1) Provide information to document that 50% of workers at the location where improvements will occur earn a living wage defined as \$20.67 per hour or \$43,000 a year in 2016.
- 2) Work with Prosper Portland to develop a workforce diversity hiring plan.

#### **Affordability**

Some projects will be approved in order to secure affordable lease rates for priority businesses and uses including, but not limited to: businesses owned by people of color, women-owned technology firms, and creation of industrial space. Property owners will enter into an affordability agreement with Prosper Portland as a part of the PIP Grant.

A Prosper Portland Project Coordinator will be available to discuss these requirements and answer any questions you may have about fulfilling them.

## ***Notes and Definitions:***

**Affordability:** Reduced lease rates for priority tenants to keep them from being priced out of the market or to allow access to a particular market. Affordability is defined as at least 25% less than prevailing commercial or industrial market rates in the area.

**Community Action Plan:** Any plan that Prosper Portland (formerly PDC) formulates with community input intending to implement the PDC Strategic Plan or other community goals.

**High Growth Business:** Average annual growth of 3-10 times its year-over-year revenues.

**Immigrant:** A person who comes to a country to take up permanent residence.

**Industrial Preservation:** Preservation and growth of industrial space within the Central Eastside.

**Race Categories:** For the PIP Grant, Prosper Portland uses definitions of race informed by Coalition of Communities of Color.

**Refugee:** A person who flees to a foreign country to escape danger or persecution.

**Tax Increment Financing (TIF):** A funding method used by Prosper Portland and other urban renewal agencies in Oregon and nationwide that dedicates a portion of property taxes generated within a defined boundary (urban renewal area) to fund projects, loans, and grants within the urban renewal area created by the Portland by City Council.

**Traded Sector:** Businesses that generate at least 50% of revenue from outside the region, or have specific prospects to do so.

### Target Industries/Sectors:

- Green Cities Products & Services (alternative energy, energy efficiency and environmental sustainability)
- Athletic, Outdoor Gear, Apparel, and Accessories
- Metals & Machinery (advanced manufacturing)
- Technology & Media (software development, film production, etc.)



# FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE REQUEST

## APPLICANT INFORMATION – Person authorized to sign the grant

Applicant/Contact: \_\_\_\_\_ Business Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_  
Cell: \_\_\_\_\_  
Project Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Check All that Apply

- ☐ I am the property owner Year property purchased: \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ I am a tenant in the building Years in business: \_\_\_\_\_ If leasing, Lease expires: \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ There are other tenants Tenant Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Lease expires: \_\_\_\_\_  
Tenant Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Lease expires: \_\_\_\_\_  
Attach additional sheet if necessary

### Property owner

Check all that apply (This information is voluntary –not required to request grant assistance)

- A) ☐ African ☐ African American ☐ Asian ☐ Latino ☐ Native American ☐ Pacific Islander  
☐ Slavic ☐ White ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_ ☐ Do not wish to provide

### Business/Tenant

Check all that apply (This information is voluntary –not required to request grant assistance)

- A) ☐ African ☐ African American ☐ Asian ☐ Latino ☐ Native American ☐ Pacific Islander  
☐ Slavic ☐ White ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_ ☐ Do not wish to provide

Demographics

## PROJECT/PROPERTY INFORMATION

Brief description of proposed project: \_\_\_\_\_

Estimated Total Project costs: \_\_\_\_\_ Estimated project start date: \_\_\_\_\_

How will the proposed improvements grow the business and/or increase jobs: \_\_\_\_\_

Has the ☐ Applicant, ☐ Business and/or ☐ Location (check all that apply) received PDC financial assistance? ☐ Yes ☐ No  
☐ Unknown

If PDC grant resources are not available, or awarded, how would the proposed project proceed? \_\_\_\_\_

Will this project support preservation of industrial space? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ NA

If you are the property owner, are you proposing to lease property at affordable rates\*? ☐ Yes ☐ No

\*At least 25% less than prevailing commercial or industrial market rates in the area.



## BUSINESS/TENANT INFORMATION

Describe your business, or tenant(s) business: \_\_\_\_\_

Please check all that apply about the business/tenant:

- ☐ It is a National Franchise    ☐ It is a Local Franchise (more than 3 locations)    ☐ There are more than 3 locations  
☐ It is a non-profit    ☐ Minors are not permitted in the business

### High Growth and/or Traded Sector:

1) Is the business considered a high growth business?    ☐ Yes    ☐ No \*average annual growth of 3-10 times its year over year revenues

2) Does business generate at least 50% of revenue from outside the region, or have specific prospects to do so?

☐ Yes    ☐ No    If yes, please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

If you answered Yes to question 1 or 2, please answer the following questions:

A) Does the business fall within one of the following Target Industries?    ☐ Athletic & Apparel    ☐ Healthcare  
☐ Green Cities Products & Services    ☐ Metals & Machinery    ☐ Technology & Media    ☐ N/A

B) Do 50% or more of the jobs pay a living wage\*?    ☐ Yes    ☐ No    \*Annual pay \$43,000 or \$20.67/hr or higher (2016)

C) Are you willing to work with PDC to develop a workforce diversity plan?    ☐ Yes    ☐ No

## CERTIFICATION BY APPLICANT

Applicant certifies that all information in this application, and all information furnished in support of this application, is given for the purpose of obtaining a Prosperity Investment Program Grant and is true and complete to the best of the applicant's knowledge.

If applicant is not the owner of the property, or is not the sole owner of the property, applicant certifies s/he has the authority to sign and enter into an agreement to perform work on the property. **Evidence of this authority must be attached.**

Verification of any of the information in this application may be obtained by PDC from any available source.

**By my signature, I confirm I have read and understand the attached Prosperity Investment Program Guidelines and Requirements and that grant funds will only be disbursed for work completed after a Grant Agreement is executed.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Applicant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## PROPERTY OWNER AUTHORIZATION – if applicant is not property owner

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Property owner hereby authorizes the above applicant to make improvements to the building listed above and take advantage of the Prosperity Investment Program.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Property Owner Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX E

### 21A.46.125: VINTAGE SIGNS:

- A. The purpose of this section is to promote the retention, restoration, reuse, and reinstatement of nonconforming signs that represent important elements of Salt Lake City's heritage and enhance the character of a corridor, neighborhood, or the community at large.
- B. Notwithstanding any contrary provision of this title:
1. An application for designation of vintage sign status as well as for the reinstatement of, modifications to, or relocation of a vintage sign shall be processed in accordance with the procedures for a special exception, as per chapter 21A.52 of this title:
    - a. Application: In addition to the general application requirements for a special exception, an application for vintage sign designation or modification shall require:
      - (1) Detailed drawings and/or photographs of the sign in its current condition, if currently existing;
      - (2) Written narrative and supporting documentation demonstrating how the sign meets the applicable criteria;
      - (3) Detailed drawings of any modifications or reinstatement being sought;
      - (4) Detailed drawings of any relocation being sought; and
      - (5) Historic drawings and/or photographs of the sign.
  2. The Zoning Administrator shall designate an existing sign as a vintage sign if the sign:
    - a. Was not placed as part of a Localized Alternative Signage Overlay District and has not been granted flexibility from the base zoning through a planned development agreement or by the Historic Landmark Commission;
    - b. Is not a billboard as defined in section [21A.46.020](#) of this chapter;
    - c. Retains its original design character, or that character will be reestablished or restored, based on historic evidence such as drawings or photographs; and,
    - d. Meets at least four (4) of the following criteria:
      - (1) The sign was specifically designed for a business, institution, or other establishment on the subject site;
      - (2) The sign bears a unique emblem, logo, or another graphic specific to the City, or region;
      - (3) The sign exhibits specific characteristics that enhance the streetscape or identity of a neighborhood;
      - (4) The sign is or was characteristic of a specific historic period;
      - (5) The sign is or was integral to the design or identity of the site or building where the sign



is located; or,

- (6) The sign represents an example of craftsmanship in the application of lighting technique, use of materials, or design.

3. A designated vintage sign may, by special exception:

- a. Be relocated within its current site.
  - b. Be modified to account for changing uses within its current site. These modifications shall be in the same style as the design of the original sign including:
    - (1) Shape and form,
    - (2) Size,
    - (3) Typography,
    - (4) Illustrative elements,
    - (5) Use of color,
    - (6) Character of illumination, and
    - (7) Character of animation.
  - c. Be restored or recreated, and reinstated on its original site.
  - d. Be relocated to a new site for use as a piece of public art, provided that the original design and character of the sign is retained, or will be restored, and it advertises a business no longer in operation. Vintage signs may only be relocated for use as public art to sites in the following districts: D-1, D-2, D-3, D-4, G-MU, CSHBD1.
  - e. Be relocated and reinstalled on the business's new site, should the business with which it is associated move, provided that the business's new location is within the same contiguous zoning district as the original location.
4. Once designated, a vintage sign is exempt from the calculation of allowed signage on a site. (Ord. 45-18, 2018)

**APPENDIX F****16.40.120.13 - Signs of historic significance.**

A. *Purpose.* The signs of historic significance regulations are intended:

1. To provide for the preservation of the City of St. Petersburg's unique character, history, and identity, as reflected in its historic and iconic signs; and
2. To preserve the sense of place that exists within the Central Business District and in areas of the City with concentrations of surviving historic signs; and
3. To protect the community from inappropriate reuse of nonconforming and/or illegal signs while ensuring that the signs are safe and well maintained; and
4. To prevent the unintentional loss of individual signs with historic or unique characteristics and, where possible, to provide a means for their retention and restoration; and
5. To allow the owner the flexibility to preserve historic and vintage signs. This classification does not preclude owners from removing these signs. The regulations of this section apply only to signs included in the City's inventory of signs of historic significance as set forth below.

B. *Criteria for identification of a sign of historic significance.*

1. The Community Preservation Commission (the Commission) shall establish and maintain an inventory of signs of historic significance.
2. A proposed sign of historic significance shall comply with the following criteria.
  - a. Technical criteria:
    1. The sign shall have been installed at least 40 years prior to the date of application;
    2. The sign is an example of technology, craftsmanship or design of the period when it was constructed;
    3. The sign uses historic sign materials or means of illumination such as exposed integral incandescent lighting, or exposed neon lighting;
    4. The sign may include, but is not limited to, a freestanding sign, a projecting sign, a roof sign, a painted building sign, or a sign integral to the building's design (fascia sign) or any other type of sign that was permitted on the property;
    5. The sign is structurally safe or can be made safe without substantially altering its historical appearance; and
    6. The sign retains the majority of its character-defining features (materials, technologies, structure, colors, shapes, symbols, text, typography, and/or

artwork) that have historical significance, that are integral to the overall sign design, or convey historical or regional context. If character-defining features have been altered or removed, the majority of these features must be able to be restored to their historic function and appearance.

b. Cultural/historical/design criteria:

1. The sign exemplifies the cultural, economic, and historic heritage of the City;
2. The sign exhibits extraordinary aesthetic quality, creativity or innovation; or
3. The sign is unique, was originally associated with a local business or local or regional chain, there is academic research, including, but not limited to, sign industry journals, articles or books to support its significance, or it is a surviving example of a once common sign type that is no longer common.

C. *Process for including a sign in the inventory of signs of historic significance.*

1. Application for inclusion in the inventory of signs of historic significance may be made by the property owner having control over a sign or may be initiated by the City.
2. Within 30 days of submittal of an application, the POD shall determine if the application is complete and if the sign meets the applicable criteria for classification, and shall notify the property owner in writing whether or not the sign is eligible for classification as a sign of historic significance.
3. If the POD determines that the sign is not eligible for classification, the property owner may appeal the decision to the Commission by following the procedures for appeals in the application and procedures section. The Commission shall review the application at a public hearing after providing notice as required in the application and procedures section.
4. If the POD determines that the sign is eligible for classification, the POD shall prepare an inventory report within 45 days of the determination of eligibility, which shall identify how the sign meets the applicable criteria, and schedule a public hearing before the Commission after providing notice as required in the application and procedures section. The report shall include the legal description of the property on which the sign is located.
5. After the public hearing, the Commission shall approve, approve with conditions, or deny the request. The decision by the Commission shall be final unless timely appealed to the City Council as provided in this Chapter.

6. Notice of the inclusion on the inventory of signs of historic significance shall be mailed to the property owner.
7. Any notice required to be mailed by this section regarding signs of historic significance is only required to be mailed to the property owner and not property owners within 200 feet.

D. *Exemptions, replica signs.*

1. Classification as a sign of historic significance does not require a certificate of appropriateness for changes to the sign or demolition of the sign.
2. Signs classified as a sign of historic significance are exempt from the sign regulations regarding height, area, and location as set forth in the sign code.
3. Signs of historic significance that are nonconforming as to size, height, or location are exempt from the regulations governing nonconforming signs and abandoned signs. However, changes to the sign may not increase the nonconformity unless a variance is approved by the Commission.
4. A sign of historic significance may be repaired, restored, and/or adaptively reused if there is sufficient surviving original material or sufficient historical documentation (photographs, postcards, permits, or other records) as determined by the POD on which to base the repair, restoration or adaptive reuse. A permit is required before a sign may be repaired, restored, and/or adaptively reused. The property owner may file an application for a permit with the POD. The POD shall review the application for compliance with this section. Upon issuance of the permit, an existing sign of historic significance may then be repaired, restored, or rehabilitated either in place, or off-site, and then re-erected on site as set forth in subsection E. (subject to receipt of any required building permit). If the POD denies the permit application, the property owner or applicant may appeal the decision to the Commission. The decision by the Commission shall be final unless appealed to the City Council.
5. A sign of historic significance may be repaired or restored to any past appearance prior to 40 years before the date of the application. If the owner of a sign of historic significance provides documentation or physical evidence that the original design included intermittent lighting features (e.g., flashing, blinking, chasing or sequentially lit elements which create the appearance of movement) or moving parts, those sign elements may be repaired and restored and shall be exempt from those prohibitions in the sign code.
6. A sign of historic significance that will be adaptively reused must retain, repair, or restore the majority of the character-defining features (e.g., materials, technologies,

structure, colors, shapes, symbols, text, typography and/or artwork) that have historical significance, or are integral to the overall design of the sign, or convey historical or regional context.

Changes to character-defining text (size, font, coloration) are not allowed. Any text that is not character defining can be changed. Changes to non-character defining text must either match or be compatible with the character defining text, or the text being replaced, in terms of materials, letter size, font, and color.

7. A replica sign is permissible when based on sufficient historical documentation of the sign and its location. The sign to be replicated must have been originally installed at least 40 years prior to the date of application. In order to construct a replica sign, the sign being replicated must be a sign of historic significance. A replica sign shall meet the same criteria, reviews and processes as a sign of historic significance. A sign can be replicated only once. Replicas of replicas are not permitted. A replica sign must use historical materials and technologies, or use contemporary materials and technologies that visually match historical ones. Replica signs shall only be allowed on the property on which the sign of historic significance was originally erected and shall not be relocated. Variances to height and area shall not be required if the original height and area can be verified, however, the replica sign must meet setback requirements unless a variance is granted by the Commission.
  8. A permit is required before a sign may be replicated. The property owner may file an application for a replication permit with the POD. The POD shall review the application for compliance with this section. A replica sign shall meet the same criteria, reviews and processes as a sign of historic significance. Upon issuance of the permit, the sign of historic significance may be replicated. If the POD denies the permit application, the property owner may appeal the decision to the Commission. The decision by the Commission shall be final unless appealed to the City Council.
- E. *Guidelines for relocating a sign of historic significance.* If the current location of a sign of historic significance prevents desired development, the sign may be relocated to another site to ensure preservation. Signs removed from their original location may be stored elsewhere before relocation.
1. A sign of historic significance may be relocated as follows:
    - a. To another location on the same property;
    - b. To another location that houses the same or similar business;
    - c. To areas of similar character as the present location; or
    - d. To the original location.

2. A sign of historic significance shall not be relocated to NT or NS zoned property.
3. All relocations are subject to the following:
  - a. The sign shall meet the required sign setbacks of the zoning district in which it is relocated or the required setback for the principal structure, whichever is less.
  - b. Projecting signs that project into the right-of-way shall have the required incidental architectural details contained in Chapter 25 and shall follow the sign permitting process.
4. If relocated to another property, the sign of historic significance shall contain text on the sign face or display a plaque that indicates that the sign has been relocated, the date of relocation, and the original location.
5. A permit is required before a sign may be relocated. The property owner may file an application for a relocation permit with the POD. The POD shall review the application for compliance with this section. Upon issuance of the permit, the sign of historic significance may be relocated. If the POD denies the permit application, the property owner may appeal the decision to the Commission. The decision by the Commission shall be final unless appealed to the City Council.
- F. *Sign calculations for a sign of historic significance.* A sign of historic significance (whether relocated or not) and a replica sign shall not count against the total allowable sign area allowed for the property and shall not count against the number of signs allowed for the property.
- G. *Demolition of a sign of historic significance.* Classification as a sign of historic significance does not prevent the owner from demolishing the sign. Demolition is subject to a 30-day waiting period, which begins upon the date of the application for a demolition permit, to facilitate relocation of the sign. The sign owner shall allow reasonable access to the sign to facilitate any possible documentation of the sign. The sign owner shall allow reasonable access to the sign for removal of all or part of a sign of historic significance from the property by a third party for reuse at a different location. If all or part of a sign is relocated to another property in the City, the guidelines for relocating a sign of historic significance contained in this section shall apply.

(Ord. No. 371-H, § 1, 6-13-2019)



**T**raveling Route 66 at twilight, a magical transformation occurs as the neon signs begin to glow...



...it is almost as if each sign were capturing a tiny portion of the vivid colors of the New Mexico sunset to preserve the glorious hues overnight and release them at daybreak. These historic signs, beckoning resident and visitor alike with flashing arrows and promises of comfort and convenience, are one of the most recognized and celebrated hallmarks of the great highway John Steinbeck called the "Mother Road."

Today the glowing gasses that define the signs we call neon are increasingly at risk. Interstate travel, economic hardship, and physical age are taking their toll on these icons of Route 66. But this loss is not just due to failed businesses and deferred repairs. It is also the result of modern sign ordinances and policies, which often ignore and sometimes exclude these historic beacons from the heyday of Route 66.

This brochure has been designed to help you and your community learn more about these colorful signs and to introduce some practical tools and recommendations you may find useful in ensuring that your share of New Mexico's night sky remains forever enchanting.

Funding for this brochure has been provided by Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program, Long Distance Trails Group Office, Santa Fe, NM, National Park Service.

This brochure was produced with the assistance of the Rural Heritage Program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

For more information on saving signs in your community, contact your city government or The Alliance.

**New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance** (The Alliance) is a statewide non-profit membership organization that promotes, protects, and advocates for New Mexico's Heritage. Chartered in 1996, the organization holds annual statewide conferences and regional workshops across the state and has successfully promoted and protected resources through an Endangered List. The Endangered List is an ongoing project, with applications taken in the fall of each year.

Applications are available on line at <http://www.nmheritage.org> or by contacting The Alliance office at (505) 989-7745. To qualify for the list, entries must be 50 years or older, within New Mexican state boundaries, historically, culturally, or architecturally significant, and in danger of being lost, destroyed, or substantially altered. For further information, or to become a member of The Alliance, contact us at:



**New Mexico Heritage  
Preservation Alliance**  
Box 2490  
Santa Fe, NM 87504  
Tel: 505-989-7745  
Email: [nmhp@earthlink.net](mailto:nmhp@earthlink.net)  
<http://www.nmheritage.org>

Photos are attributed to Dan Marriott, Rural Heritage Program, National Trust for Historic Preservation; with the exception of Rio Pecos, which is attributed to John Murphey, NM Historic Preservation Division and Paradise Motel attributed to David Kammer.

## Saving New Mexico's **ROUTE 66** Historic Signs





## Various Mounting Styles

Exterior neon signs are classified as to their type of mounting. Along Route 66, the remaining historic signs reflect the pole, vertical, rooftop and fascia techniques of mounting signs. The majority of these signs are pole signs with bracket mounts to steel posts.



The sign for Motel Capitan (above left) and the restaurant sign (above right) are examples of pole mounted signs.



Budville Trading Company, fronting Route 66, started from a modest mercantile in the mid-1930s, prospered to become a landmark known up and down Route 66. The Budville sign is an example of a pole mounted sign.



These Tucumcari rooftop signs are the only free standing channel style rooftop signs remaining along Route 66 in New Mexico.

Photo: David Kammer

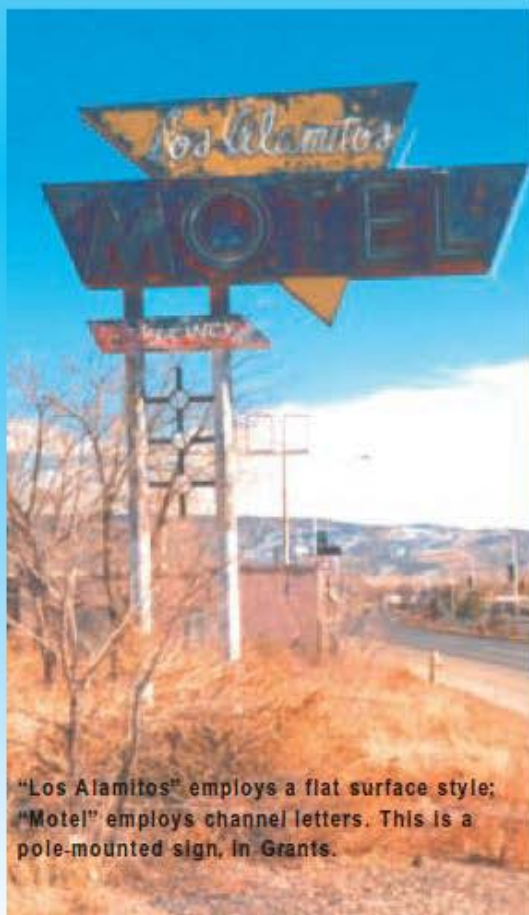
## Preservation... Working with Change

In many communities across the United States, historic signs that would no longer be constructed or even allowed under most modern sign ordinances, have been embraced, protected and restored because they have become recognized as icons. Imagine Los Angeles without its famous "Hollywood" sign — nothing more than a crass real estate advertisement when first erected. Across Baltimore's revitalized Inner Harbor the giant "Domino Sugars" sign still warms and brightens each dusk — a reminder of an industrial harbor of another era. And what would happen to baseball at Boston's Fenway Park without the landmark "Citgo" sign and its

regular and reliable rhythmic repetitions? These signs are historic features that long ago transcended their basic function to promote a consumer product. And these signs, which violate most modern every ordinance in Los Angeles, Baltimore and Boston, have been specially preserved and protected because...well...the cities just wouldn't be the same without them.

Smaller communities too are beginning to realize that historic signs are part of their heritage. Theater marquees are being restored even though films are no longer shown in buildings converted to other uses. Signs once beckoning travelers to grand hotels and roadside motels have been relit and adopted as the names of the senior citizen housing or apartments to which the hotel or motel has been converted. And some communities have simply "grandfathered" or allowed the historic signs of businesses to continue to operate under special historic sign ordinance provisions.

In other instances, a minor modification to a historic sign may allow a business the opportunity to continue the legacy. An abandoned Montgomery Ward neon roof sign, too large to be allowed by modern sign ordinances, was creatively adapted by a Maryland developer who replaced the "W" and "D" from "Ward" with a "P" and "K" — thus creating the Montgomery "Park" office building from the old department store's warehouse. The restored and modified historic sign allowed the developer much greater visibility than any new sign could ever provide. Similarly, along the historic National Road in Indiana (the nation's first federally funded highway, begun in 1804 and now known as US Route 40), the neon "US 40 Motel" sign was converted to identify a new business use by replacing the "E" and "L" in "Motel" with an "O" and "R". With the addition of an historically designed "Parts" the old sign has new life as "US 40 Motor Parts".



"Los Alamos" employs a flat surface style; "Motel" employs channel letters. This is a pole-mounted sign, in Grants.



## What do sign ordinances do?

Sign ordinances and policies help communities define who they are, prevent unsightly, garish and distracting signs, and enhance the roadside environment. While these are lofty goals and objectives, they are occasionally applied without any recognition or accommodation for signs that may have historic or cultural significance. As a result, some communities are actually losing interesting and colorful neon and other historic signs because they no longer conform to local policies governing signs.

For communities along Route 66 it is particularly important to determine if any existing policies or codes are detrimental to historic signs. Could a well-intended provision for height or size restrictions in your ordinance actually make unlawful a historic sign that has long enhanced your evening drive? There are instances where older and historic signs are "grandfathered" or "allowed" to remain as long as the business continues. But if the business closes or relocates, what happens to the historic sign? Are there accommodations to allow historic signs to be adopted for new uses?

In communities without any sign ordinances or guidance, you may want to consider the value historic signs add to your community—both as a cultural legacy and tourism resource for the increasing number of travelers experiencing and looking for the romance of old Route 66. Are any of these historic signs at risk? If not, what assurances do you have that some unexpected action might cause their loss in the future?

As with all ordinance and policies, it is important they reflect the broad goals, needs and aspirations of your community. The idea of neon and other historic signs as special resources may not be embraced by all communities; however, if these are resources that your community values and enjoys, you must ensure that your community provides the flexibility and commitment to encourage their preservation.



### Franciscan Lodge Signs

(c. 1953), 1101 E. Santa Fe Boulevard, Grants, NM. The Franciscan Lodge offers a relatively rare example of double neon signage incorporating two distinct types of signs. A sign mounted on three metal posts is located in the northeast courtyard of the double L-plan motel and is approximately 30 feet high and 39 feet wide. Using the flat letter style, it contains the neon-lit words "Franciscan Lodge" topped by the smaller lettered "Your home on the road." A second rooftop-mounted sign is approximately nine feet high and nine feet wide and is located above the hipped roof of the office and secured with guy wires. Also using the flat letter style, the sign contains neon-lit words "Franciscan Lodge", "No Vacancy", and "Office", with "TV" on a panel that was added to the original sign. An arrow with two neon-lit bulbs illuminated by sequentially animated light bulbs points downward toward the office door.

### Blue Spruce Lodge Sign

(c. 1950), 1115 E. 66 Boulevard, Gallup, NM. This pole-mounted sign employs a single metal pole painted to effect the trunk of a spruce tree. Located at the sidewalk in the middle of a courtyard with a U-shape, the sign is approximately 28 feet high and nine feet wide and has the form of a spruce tree. Using a flat letter style, the sign contains the neon-lit words "Blue Spruce Lodge", "Steam Heat", and "No Vacancy." A popular landmark along Route 66, the sign is included as an inset in the early postcards published for the motel.



### Sun n Sand Motel Sign

(c. 1950) E. Will Rogers Drive, Santa Rosa, NM. Approximately 40 feet high and 21 feet wide, the sign is mounted on two metal poles. Using the channel letter style, the neon portion of the sign contains the words "Sun n Sand" and "Motel" with the former set within a large Zia sun at the top of the sign. The sign is located approximately 10 feet from the roadway in a broad valley at the northeast corner of the motel property. An early example of the use of higher sign poles that would become common in the 1970s, the height of the sign may represent the original owner's efforts to compensate for the incline on which the property is located, giving the sign greater visibility to motorists descending into the valley along Route 66 from both east and west.

## Neon Technology & Construction

Common to all of these signs was the technology of construction and installation. Neon tubes were generally affixed to metal. Most often they were attached to a sheet metal box on which illuminated details such as letters or figures were painted onto the metal with the box providing a housing for the wiring and electrodes as well as the two sides necessary for a double-faced sign. The glass tubing was then attached to the electrodes at holes punched through the sheet metal. Less frequently, a silicon glass was fired onto the metal, creating a porcelain, or vitreous enamel coating over which the tubing was placed. In many instances the letters and figures painted on the sheet metal were flat; in other instances the edges of the letters or figures were raised, creating channels in which the neon tubing was placed. While the latter channel letter technique offered the advantage of concentrating the tube's light, thus producing greater visibility, its flat horizontal surfaces tended to retain moisture, making the metal more susceptible to rusting, which, no doubt, accounts for the relatively low number of historic channel letter signs.

NM Highway Cultural Properties, April 4, 2002; Historic Preservation Division, File 1-011, "Neon Signs Along Route 66" by David Kanner



## What can I do to help preserve my community?

As with any type of historic or special community feature, it is necessary to "define" the characteristics and features that distinguish a historic sign from the others. There are many ways to do this. You may establish a time period designating historic significance—for example, "Signs from 1920 to 1950s are most representative of travel along the original Route 66 in our community." You may choose to recognize all signs prior to a certain date or you may choose to focus on a particular type (neon or rustic, for example).

Once you have defined what constitutes a historic sign in your community, you will want to conduct an inventory of the signs which meet the definition. How many do you have? Are some considered community icons or landmarks while others are hardly noticed? Are any signs examples of particular technological advancements or construction? What condition are the signs in? Are any of your historic signs on abandoned properties?

Flexible sign ordinances can be an ideal opportunity to preserve the historic signs in your community. While ordinances are designed to protect commonly held values and ensure quality of life you must still be aware of the impacts they will have on property owners. For example, how would you respond to the following two scenarios?

**Scenario 1** A profitable business owner insists that his or her historic sign is a detriment to their business and should be replaced by a modern sign.

**Scenario 2** A business owner barely surviving says he cannot afford to replace the broken neon tubes that have historically identified the family business—a new sign would be easier and cheaper.

In scenario 1, you must question if the ordinance is properly and evenly applied to all businesses in your community. If it is, the business owner should be required to comply with the policy (a provision may even allow the erection of an additional modern sign on site).

In scenario 2, you must consider the impact the ordinance will have on a struggling business owner. Can you provide any assistance (technical or financial) to the owner? You may want to have facts and figures available that demonstrate that restoration (often assumed more expensive) is more affordable than the owner may realize.



## HISTORIC LANDMARK SIGN (HLS) TREATMENT PLAN

OFFICE USE ONLY

**T** \_\_\_\_\_ **Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ ☐ Administrative ☐ Legislative

### PART 1 SIGN INFORMATION

Type of Application:

☐ HLS Designation      *HLS type:*   ☐ Classic HLS   ☐ Transitional HLS   ☐ Replica HLS

☐ Revision to a previously approved Treatment Plan

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ GPS Lat: 32. \_\_\_\_\_ Long: -110. \_\_\_\_\_

Current Zoning: \_\_\_\_\_ Sign Code District: \_\_\_\_\_ Parcel ID#: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of construction: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of installation: \_\_\_\_\_

Original business/copy: \_\_\_\_\_

(attach additional sheet if necessary)

Original address and Parcel ID # (if sign has been relocated): \_\_\_\_\_

Sign Height: \_\_\_\_\_ Sign Area: \_\_\_\_\_

Area of minimum bounding rectangle (X \* Y): \_\_\_\_\_ "Z" Dimension: \_\_\_\_\_

Is adaptive reuse (change of copy) proposed? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Is relocation proposed? (Not allowed for initial designations of Replica HLS) ☐ Yes ☐ No

Are there non-commercial uses within 300 feet of the proposed HLS? ☐ Yes ☐ No

#### *SUMMARY CHECKLIST: Designation Guidelines/Criteria*

Are moving parts or intermittent lighting features proposed? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Is the proposed HLS a detached, projecting or roof sign? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Does the proposed HLS include exposed integrated incandescent or neon lighting? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Did the proposed HLS originally include exposed integrated incandescent or neon lighting? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Does the proposed HLS use materials and technology representative of its period of construction? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Is the proposed HLS non-rectangular or non-planar? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Is the proposed HLS structurally safe? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Can the proposed HLS be made safe without substantially altering its historic appearance? ☐ Yes ☐ No

*Check 'Yes' if narrative in the sign's Treatment Plan describes compliance with the following required criteria:*

The sign exemplifies the cultural, economic, and historic heritage of Tucson. ☐ Yes ☐ No

The sign exhibits extraordinary aesthetic quality, creativity, and innovation. ☐ Yes ☐ No

The sign is unique; or, originally associated with a local or regional chain; or, scholarly ☐ Yes ☐ No

documentation exists supporting its preservation; or, a rare surviving example of a once common type.

Has the sign been altered, removed and reinstalled, or replaced pursuant to Sec. 3-96.C.1? ☐ Yes ☐ No

The sign retains and/or restores the majority of its character-defining features. ☐ Yes ☐ No

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**PART 2 PRE-SUBMITTAL INFORMATION**

Have you attended a HLS pre-submittal conference with City staff? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Please indicate meeting date. \_\_\_\_\_

Have you had any contact with the registered neighborhood association in which the proposed sign would be located (if any), adjacent property owners, or the Scenic Arizona Coalition, regarding the proposed HLS? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you offered to meet and discuss the proposed HLS on a specified date and time with the registered neighborhood association in which the proposed sign would be located (if any), adjacent property owners, or the Scenic Arizona Coalition? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Did you conduct a neighborhood meeting? If yes, attach neighborhood meeting documentation (copy of the meeting invitation, mailing list, date of mailing, sign-in sheet, and summary notes from the meeting). Please indicate meeting date ☐ Yes ☐ No  
\_\_\_\_\_

---

**PART 3 OWNER/APPLICANT INFORMATION**

**Owner** \_\_\_\_\_

Company Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Cell \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

**Applicant or Agent** \_\_\_\_\_

Company Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Cell \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Engineer** \_\_\_\_\_

Company Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Cell \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

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## PART 4 TREATMENT PLAN REQUIREMENTS

For more information and examples of items listed below, please reference the *Application and Review Guidelines for Historic Landmark Signs* manual available through the Tucson Historic Preservation Office, or online at:  
<<http://cms3.tucsonaz.gov/preservation/historicsigns/index.html>>

**13 sets of the following Treatment Plan materials must be submitted, folded to 8½" x 11":**

### *Description of Existing Sign Condition*

- ☐ Existing color elevation, or color photo showing elevation of HLS
- ☐ Description of the age of construction materials and type of illumination
- ☐ Site plan
- ☐ Photographs of existing site conditions

### *Compliance with HLS Designation Guidelines*

- ☐ Narrative describing compliance with each of the technical and cultural/historical/design guidelines
- ☐ List of character defining features
- ☐ Documentation of the sign's historic authenticity (i.e. proof of age, materials, and location via permits, dated photographs, site plans, elevation drawings, etc.)

### *Maintenance Program*

- ☐ Narrative describing plans for maintenance of the sign for future years
- ☐ Estimate of total lumens

### *Performance Requirements/Proposed Treatments*

- ☐ Color elevation, or color photo-simulation, of proposed treatment
- ☐ Narrative description of compliance with performance requirements, specifically any proposed repair, restoration, adaptive reuse (change of copy), relocation, or replication (may include a combination of treatments).
- ☐ GPS coordinates of the final location (if different from current location)
- ☐ List of new parts/list of parts and materials to be replaced
- ☐ Mitigation measures to reduce impact on non-commercial uses within 300 feet, if applicable

### *Additional materials*

- ☐ One (1) copy of the Pima County Assessor's map of the subject parcel(s)
- ☐ Completed 207 Waiver
- ☐ Consent to access prior to demolition
- ☐ Appropriate fees payable to the City of Tucson
- ☐ Pre-submittal Conference Verification Sheet (optional)
- ☐ Documentation of neighborhood meeting (optional)

## PART 5 SIGNATURES

I (We), the undersigned, request designation of the subject sign as a Historic Landmark Sign (HLS). I (We) represent that the information in this application and the supporting materials are true and accurate to the best of my (our) knowledge.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Owner's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Applicant/Agent signature (requires letter of authorization from owner)

\_\_\_\_\_  
date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Architect/Engineer signature (requires letter of authorization from owner)

\_\_\_\_\_  
date



## VINTAGE TULSA

# *neon signs*

A FEW OF OUR FAVORITE NEON TREASURES  
AWARD-WINNING PHOTOGRAPHY BY RALPH COLE







## take the tour ...

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The Tulsa Foundation for Architecture (TFA) was awarded a Preservation Services Fund grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Ruth and Allen Mayo Fund for Historic Preservation in Oklahoma to conduct a survey of Tulsa's neon signs. At the time of completion, we surveyed 259 signs with relevant details including sign name, type, mount, style of lettering, history, location and neon tubing description. The boundaries for the Neon Sign Survey were 56th Street North (north); 61st Street South (south); Highway 169 (east); and Highway 75 (west).

Of the signs surveyed, some naturally rose to the top of the list for many and varied reasons. This brochure features some of our favorites. We hope you enjoy them, too.



412

51

Denver Ave.

Detroit Ave.

Greenwood Ave.

W 6th St.  
W 7th St.

444

75

Cincinnati Ave.

S Quaker Ave.

S Troost Ave.

S Lewis Ave.

S Harvard Ave.

S Yale Ave.

S Hudson Ave.

S Fulton Ave.

E 1st St.

E 11th St.

E 12th St.

E 15th St.

E 18th St.

E 21st St.

E 31st St.

E 36th St.

64

51

S Utica Ave.

S Peoria Ave.

Riverside Dr.







- 1 **Vernon A.M.E. Church** • 311 N Greenwood Ave.
- 2 **Tulsa Abstract & Title Co.** • 612 S Denver Ave.
- 3 **Meadow Gold** • E 11th St. & S Quaker Ave.
- 4 **El Rancho Grande** • 1629 E 11th St.
- 5 **Phoenix Cleaners** • 125 E 18th St.
- 6 **Dunwell Sushi** • In the Raw • 3321 S Peoria Ave.
- 7 **The Brook** • 3401 S Peoria Ave.
- 8 **Circle Cinema** • 10 S Lewis Ave.
- 9 **Moody's Jewelry** • 1137 S Harvard Ave.
- 10 **Pioneer Cleaners Laundry** • 1145 S Harvard Ave.
- 11 **Ann's Bakery** • 7 N Harvard Ave.
- 12 **Desert Hills Motel** • 5520 E 11th St.
- 13 **White River Fish Market** • 1708 N Sheridan Ave.
- 14 **Brookshire Motel** • 11017 E 11th St.

311 N GREENWOOD AVE.

1

## *vernon a.m.e. church*

The only religious structure in Tulsa with a neon sign, the Vernon A.M.E. Church has a vertical sign with both flat-block, double-tube letters and flat-block, single-tube letters. There is a plaque on the bottom of the sign that reads: "In appreciation of Ms. Cora Shaw 11-95 Tulsa Neon." The sign was manufactured circa 1945.





## *tulsa abstract & title co.*

Claude Neon Federal Sign Company built this billboard-style roof sign in 1955. The sign features flat-block, single-tube letters, a neon arrow and neon outline. The sign is in its original location and is fully operational.





### *meadow gold*

This large, open roof-style sign was built circa 1939 and was originally located on the southwest corner of 11th and Lewis. In 2004, the Tulsa Foundation for Architecture was awarded a National Park Service Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program grant to restore the sign. A change of ownership and subsequent demolition of the building on which the sign stood for 65 years rallied Tulsans and Route 66 enthusiasts across the country to save the historic landmark sign. A support pavilion was erected and the signs, restored by Claude Neon Federal Sign Company, feature both flat-block, double-tube letters and flat-block, single tube letters. The neon clocks on both sides of the sign have been replicated and installed at a later date.



## *el rancho grande*

Originally located downtown at 6th & Boulder, this sign was manufactured in 1950 and moved to its present location in 1953. The building that houses the current restaurant housed a grocery store in 1924, and later a paint store in 1928. Located on Route 66, this projection sign has flat-script, single-tube letters, flat-block, single-tube letters, and a neon “matador.” The arrow on top of the neon sign is a generic addition to the original sign.



## *phoenix cleaners*

Phoenix Cleaners has been a Tulsa business since the 1930s and was originally located at 407 N Main St., although it was not yet named Phoenix Cleaners. When the first store burned to the ground in 1942, the owners opened their business at 123 E 18th St. and renamed it “Phoenix Cleaners” as it had, like the fabled bird, literally risen from the ashes. The current owner’s great uncle designed the marquee sign and the Wally Werr Sign Co. built the sign with flat-block, single-tube letters. A Sand Springs company porcelainized the sign. In 1948, the business and the sign moved one door east to their current location at 125 E 18th St. The sign is operational and has not been altered, although it has been restored. The owners had some problems with the paper delivery boy, who on several occasions broke the sign’s neon tubing throwing the newspaper. The owners soon cancelled their subscription.





## *dunwell sushi • in the raw*

Currently known as “In The Raw” an upscale sushi restaurant, this was originally the site of Dunwell Cleaners founded by Ralph E. Johnson and operated as a cleaners until the late 1990s. This vertical sign has flat-block, single-tube lettering and has been altered to read “Sushi” instead of “Cleaners.”



B  
R  
O  
O

*Restaurant & Bar*

**HALF PRICE WINE**

**BY THE GLASS**



## *the brook*

---

The Brook opened as a theater in 1949 and featured “Father Was a Fullback” starring Fred McMurray for its inaugural. The Brook was designed by architect William Henry Cameron Calderwood and features one of Tulsa’s only marquee-style signs that include channel-block, double-tube letters, channel-script, single-tube letters, and neon banding. Also of note are the glass panels in the letterbox. The Wally Werr Sign Co. manufactured the original sign.





10 S LEWIS AVE.

8

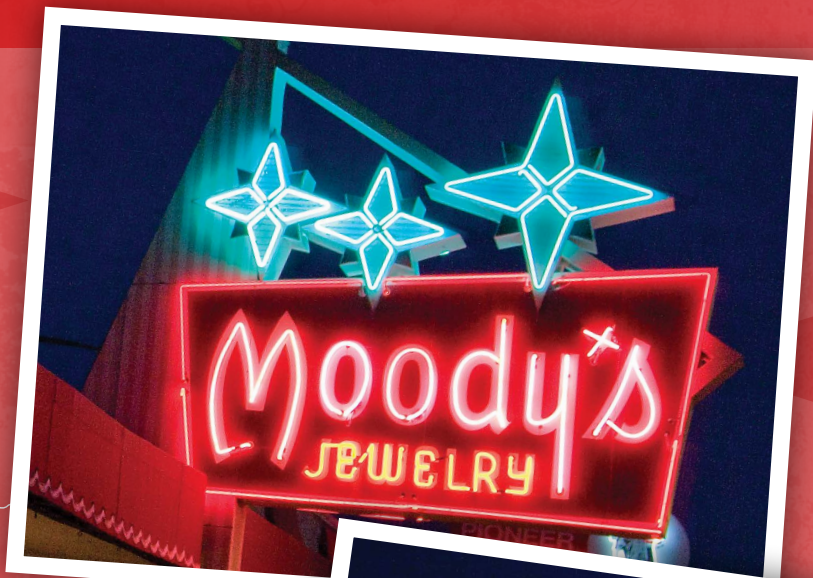
## *circle cinema*

Located in historic Whittier Square, the Circle Theater opened in 1928 as one of Tulsa's first suburban movie theatres. The theatre was renovated in 1963 and became the "New" Circle Theater, an adult theater, in 1978. In 2003, the Tulsa Foundation for Architecture received a Community Development Block Grant to acquire the theater and adjacent building for restoration by the Circle Cinema Foundation. The neon sign, restored in 2005 by Claude Neon Federal Sign Company, is a marquee sign with flat-block, double-tube letters with a neon outline and banding.



## *moody's jewelry*

Moody's has been a family-owned jewelry store in Tulsa since 1944. This original location features two neon signs; one is a fascia sign with flat-block, single-tube letters and the other is a pylon-style pole sign with flat-block, single-tube letters with a neon outline and neon stars. The Wally Werr Sign Co. manufactured the signs when the store opened.





## *pioneer cleaners laundry*

Located near Moody's Jewelry, this pole sign features flat-block, single-tube letters and a neon "pioneer woman" inspired by the Pioneer Woman statue on the grounds of the Marland Mansion in Ponca City, Oklahoma. Due to the visible wiring on the top of the sign, it is possible that this sign may have been mounted as a projection sign originally.



## *ann's bakery*

Serving Tulsans since 1938, Ann's Bakery was Tulsa's oldest scratch bakery which closed in 2018. It had two identical fascia signs with flat-block, single-tube letters and flat-script, single-tube letters. Either Claude Neon or Wally Werr Sign Co. manufactured the signs circa 1950.

Additionally, the bakery had a different pole-mounted neon sign, circa 1946 that has since been removed.





## *desert hills motel*

Located on Route 66, this pylon-style pole sign has flat-block, double-tube letters, flat-script, single-tube letters, a neon arrow and a neon cactus. The Desert Hills is one of Tulsa's few remaining motor-court motels that were at one time very common on the Mother Road. Claude Neon Federal Sign Company manufactured this sign circa 1970.

## *white river fish market*

O.T. Fallis opened the White River Fish Market in 1932 and added the dine-in restaurant in 1942. Garry Cozby purchased the market and restaurant in 1981. The White River Fish Market is a Tulsa tradition and offers fresh seafood in an informal setting. The pole sign has flat-block, single-tube letters and an animated neon fish.







## *brookshire motel*

Located on Route 66, the Brookshire Motel features a pole sign that has flat-block, single-tube letters. Although only a portion of the neon remains, the original sign would have also featured flat-script, single-tube letters. The sign was manufactured circa 1950.



No comprehensive survey is ever truly finished. Since this survey was completed, several new neon signs have emerged along Tulsa's arterials. Sadly however, just as many vintage neon signs have disappeared. TFA's part in saving the historic Meadow Gold sign from demolition and the resulting restoration and relocation project continue to be an inspiration and a reminder that our existing vintage neon signs can be reborn, restored and used to tell the story of Tulsa's colorful history.





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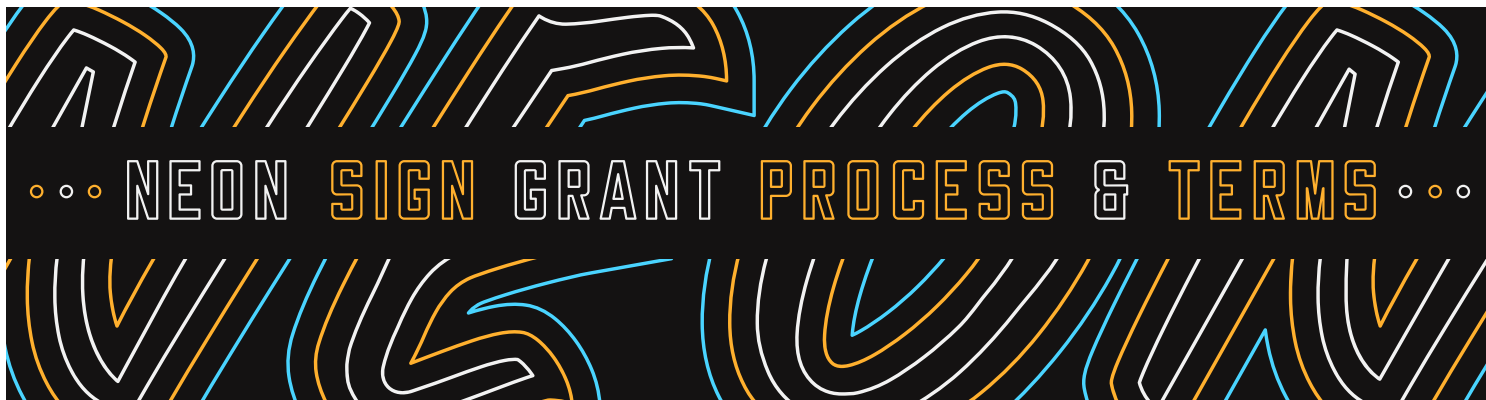
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## BY EXECUTIVE ORDER, THE ROUTE 66 COMMISSION WAS FORMED TO ADVOCATE FOR HERITAGE TOURISM AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION ALONG ROUTE 66.

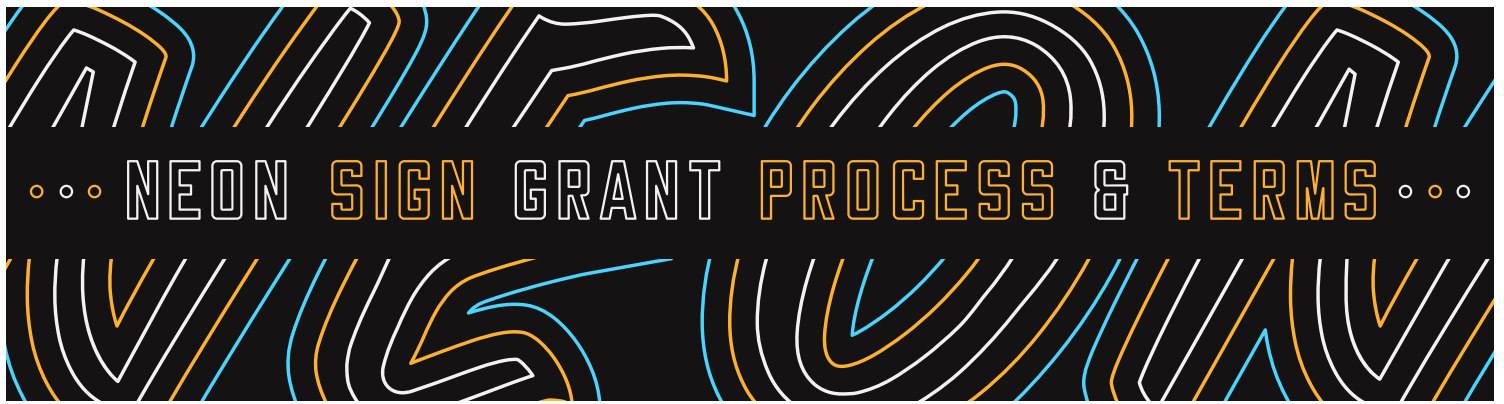
**One Goal:** Encourage quality and consistency of a historically thematic feature (neon) through a Neon Sign Grant Program for property or business owners to install signage containing not less than 25% neon as determined in Ordinance 23933 establishing an overlay zoning district: “Route 66 Overlay” and in the Tulsa Zoning Code Chapter 60.130 A and B including figures 60-2, 60-3 and 60-4.

**Please note:** Prioritizing the grant opportunity for as many unique businesses as possible will result in a higher rate of business participation and greater diversity. Spreading neon signs to a higher percentage of Route 66 corridor businesses creates greater branding along the Route. To meet these priorities, only one application from each unique business will be considered. If awarded, that business may apply for another grant for an additional sign one year from the date of the signed grant award. Preference will be given to first-time applicants.

**Also:** Downtown business and property owners may apply for the grant, however, overlay zoning is not currently allowed within the central business district. Therefore, special provisions of the Overlay District are not available to downtown grantees and rules such as sign size and placement revert to the requirements of the underlying zoning. Other grant eligibilities and processes remain in effect for downtown applicants.







## ELIGIBILITY GUIDELINES

- Signs must be either an Exterior Free-Standing Sign (Permanent, Fixed Structure) or Exterior Wall Sign (Permanent, Fixed Structure). Signs may be restored signs or new signs.
- Signs must adhere to the City's Sign Ordinance and Route 66 Overlay provisions.
- The intent of this project is to create a neon corridor along Route 66 with historically - inspired signage that uses at least 25% exposed (external) neon (or LED) tubing as the primary element of the design. Neon is the preferred medium
- Property must be located within the boundaries of the Route 66 Ordinance Overlay.
- Applicant(s) must be the property owner(s) or commercial lessee(s). If a lessee, the Application must include the property owner(s) signature on the Application.
- Property must be zoned for commercial or industrial use and used for commercial or industrial purposes.
- Property must NOT have any outstanding judgment liens, code violations, and/or delinquent ad valorem property taxes.
- A three-year sign warranty must be included in the contract between Applicant and Sign Contractor.
- Eligible expenses include, the sign construction, city permit fees and installation; but do NOT include providing electricity from the power source to the sign or professional consultant design services.
- Any proposed sign that protrudes into the right-of-way, except as outlined by the provisions of the Overlay District, still requires a separate License Agreement.

## PROJECT COMMENCEMENT

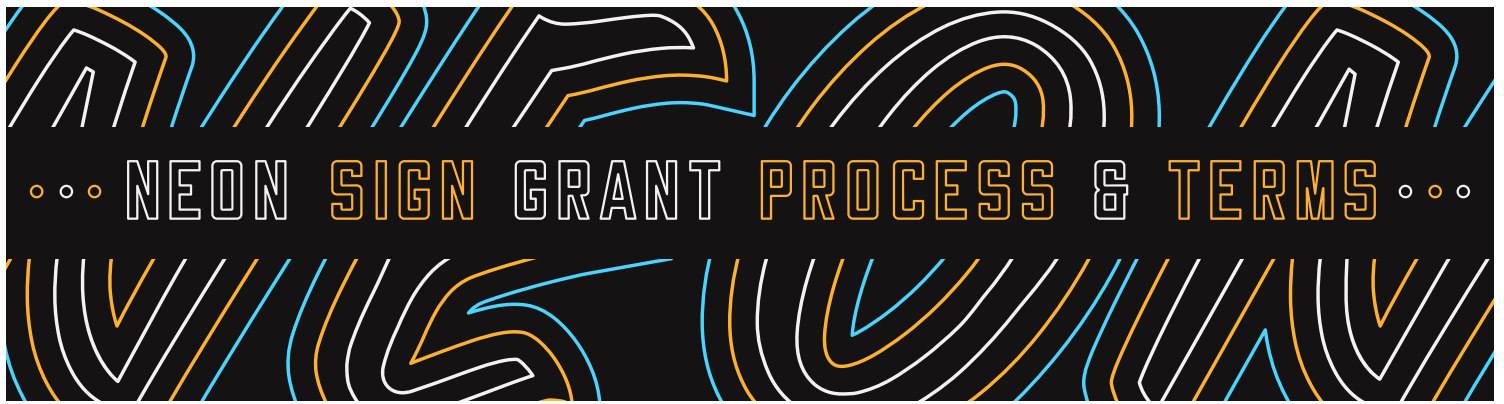
- Project must not commence until the Application has been approved by the Mayor as evidenced by a signed contract and a Notice to Proceed has been issued to the Applicant by the City of Tulsa Project Manager
- The City is not responsible for any of the Applicant's costs prior to the final approval of the Application, including preparation of the application, design or any other cost incurred regardless of whether the Application is submitted, accepted or rejected.

## APPLICANT MATCH

- The Applicant must provide not less than 50% of the eligible cost of the sign. The City's matching contribution will be 50% of the applicant's eligible cost of the sign but not to exceed \$10,000. Grant check to be remitted to Applicant upon approved completion of project as detailed below.







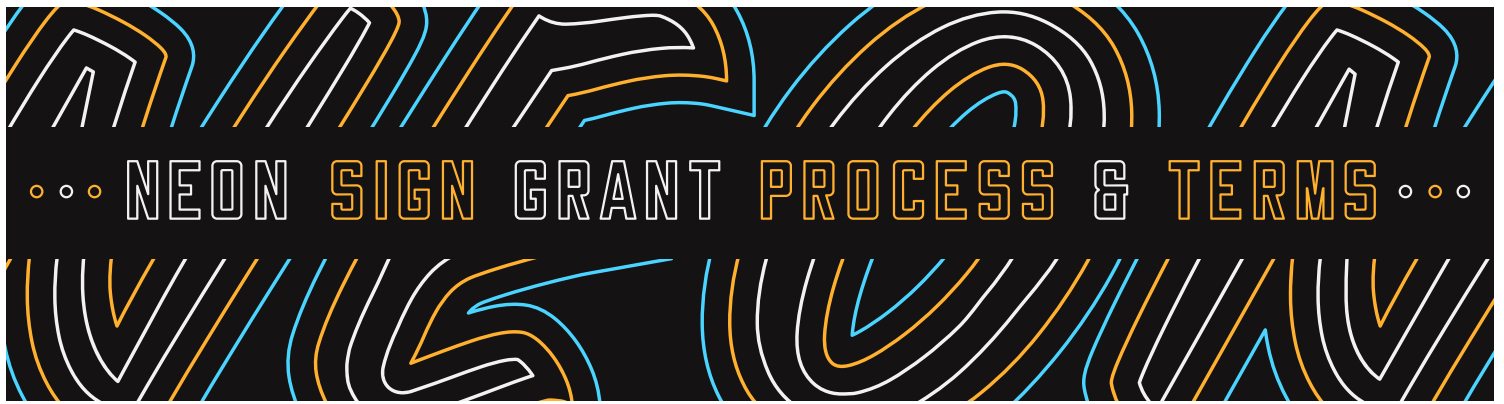
## THE GRANT APPLICATION WILL BE PROCESSED AS OUTLINED BELOW:

- If the Application has a signed Preliminary Recommendation to move forward by the Review Committee, the Applicant submits appropriate construction plans and Sign Permit Form to the City of Tulsa Permit Department with the Sign Contractor clearly identified. Sign Contractor documents should include calculations used to determine that the sign contains required 25% area of neon and warranty information.
- Following Sign Permit approval, the Applicant submits copy of Sign Permit and 100% complete construction documents including but not limited to a final cost estimate to the Review Committee for review and final grant recommendation to the Route 66 Commission.
- Applicant will furnish: (1) Applicant's city sales tax I. D. number, (2) completed W-9 for Applicant (3) Supplier Registration Form.
- The Route 66 Commission makes a final recommendation to the Mayor. Upon Mayor's approval, a contract for the grant will be executed by the applicant and Mayor for the grant amount and a Contract Number will be assigned.
- Applicant receives: "Notice to Proceed" from City of Tulsa Project Manager (no work should begin prior to Notice to Proceed).
- Applicant's Sign Contractor completes sign in accordance with approved permitted construction documents.
- Upon completion and approval by the Project Manager of all work, the Applicant submits (1) receipt from the Sign Contractor of paid eligible project cost payment with zero balance indicated and (2) an invoice to the City of Tulsa for the grant amount appearing in the grant contract. The Contract Number must appear on all Applicant invoices. City of Tulsa has no obligation above the awarded grant amount. The Mayor approves payment of the grant funding.

## BY SUBMITTING ITS APPLICATION, APPLICANT UNDERSTANDS AND AGREES

- Applicant is not entitled to receive any grant funds unless and until the Mayor approves the expenditure following proper completion of the sign and submission of all required documentation. Funding is also contingent upon the availability of Vision Tulsa funds allocated for this purpose.
- Applicant agrees to maintain the sign in good condition and proper working order after installation.
- Applicant agrees the sign will not be removed or relocated without City's consent within a three-year period. If the sign is removed or relocated to a location outside the Route 66 Overlay area within a three-year period, Applicant agrees to refund to City the percentage of the grant funding
- Applicant received as determined by the following calculation: the sum of 1095 minus the number of days the sign was maintained at its approved location divided by 1095.
- Applicant's rights and obligations may not be assigned without the City's prior written consent.
- Applicant agrees to comply with all applicable laws regarding equal employment opportunity and nondiscrimination.
- Applicant shall defend and indemnify the City against all claims, including legal fees and costs, resulting from or related to the sign.





**FOR QUESTIONS, PLEASE CONTACT EITHER PERSON BELOW. TO SUBMIT THE APPLICATION AND SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS, PLEASE SUBMIT TO OR CONTACT DENNIS WHITAKER.**

**Dennis Whitaker, Planner**

Tulsa Planning Office  
2 West 2nd Street, Suite 800 Tulsa, OK 74103  
dwhitaker@incog.org | (918) 579-9457

**Glen R Sams, P.E. Senior Engineer – Transportation Design**

City of Tulsa - Engineering Services Department  
2317 S. Jackson Ave., Suite 105 Tulsa, Ok. 74107  
gsams@cityoftulsa.org | (918) 596-9578



## **Save Our Signs Fund – How does it work?**

JFG, a regionally recognized brand of coffee with strong roots in Knoxville, understands the importance of historic signage as part of the architectural landscape of a community. In support of this idea, JFG is restoring the two iconic illuminated JFG signs in downtown Knoxville: in the Old City on Jackson Avenue (atop the JFG Flats residences) and above the south end of the Gay Street Bridge.

To encourage other local businesses and individuals to invest in repair and maintenance of other historic signs in the community, JFG will donate a portion of proceeds of JFG Coffee products sold at participating retailers between August 24, 2010 and December 31, 2010 directly to the Knox Heritage ***Save Our Signs Fund***.

The ***Save Our Signs Fund*** will be administered by Knox Heritage with these goals in mind:

- 1. Raising awareness of the importance of historic signs in East Tennessee.** Our region is filled with signs that tell a story about the history of local commerce, retail, and industry. Many of these historic signs, including three-dimensional markers on roadsides and structures or artfully painted emblems on brick walls and barns, are essential to understanding and preserving a community's identity.
- 2. Providing needed funds for restoration of historic signs.** Restoration or maintenance of historic signs is almost always possible, but it can be cost-prohibitive for some owners or interested groups. Money raised for the Knox Heritage ***Save Our Signs Fund*** will be awarded by Knox Heritage to owners of historic signs through an application process. For complete requirements and guidelines, please see the Knox Heritage ***Save Our Signs Fund*** application.

JFG encourages other businesses and individuals to donate to the ***Save Our Signs Fund*** to support the effort as well. Donations can be made the following ways:

- Donate online at [www.knoxheritage.org](http://www.knoxheritage.org)
- Call the Knox Heritage office at 865-523-8008 to donate via credit card.
- Write a check to Knox Heritage and mail to P.O. Box, 1242, Knoxville, TN 37901. (Indicate "Save Our Signs" in the memo line of the check.)

All proceeds are tax-deductible and will be used exclusively to fund the restoration of historically and culturally significant signage throughout the East Tennessee region via the ***Save Our Signs Fund***.

For more information about Knox Heritage's ***Save Our Signs Fund***, please visit [www.knoxheritage.org](http://www.knoxheritage.org), email us at [info@knoxheritage.org](mailto:info@knoxheritage.org), or call 865-523-8008.